

## Dealing with distractions



We are constantly bombarded by things competing to attract our attention. So it's not surprising that trying to avoid distractions is an issue, not only at university, but in all areas of life. It can be especially difficult when all the different areas of your life happen in the same place - for instance, when you write your research and organise your social life on the computer, or when the place you do most of your studying is also where you have home and family commitments.

We asked students at the University of Reading what their worst distractions were. On the right is the top ten - click on any one to see the suggestions students made on how to deal with them.

If the first thing you try doesn't work, don't give up. Be aware that everyone works differently, so not all suggestions will work for all students. Use the ideas that work for you, or adapt them to fit. Or scroll down to read more about how to identify and deal with your distractions.

The first step in getting control of your distractions is to **identify** them. Then **get them in perspective** and think in advance about **strategies to deal with them**.

### Identifying your distractions

Start by identifying what it is that's eating up your time. One thing you can do is to **keep a time use diary** - set an alarm on the hour and write down everything that you've been doing (be honest!). Or try this **interactive time-use diary**.

Sometimes the problem is that you're trying to do two things at once - write an essay and have an online conversation, or read a book and watch television. There are things that can double up usefully (for instance, thinking about a piece of work while jogging, or reading while commuting), but in other cases it just means doing two things badly, and not getting any satisfaction out of either.

If your time-use diary says you're spending all day studying, but you're still not getting anywhere, ask yourself if doubling up is the problem. If it is, you need to think about setting some time and space boundaries between study activities and other activities.

### Getting things in perspective

There are some things which we know we shouldn't be allowing to distract us from studying because we only do them for our own enjoyment - playing computer games or watching television, for instance. Others we think of as essential and unavoidable, like shopping or washing up. Some come somewhere in between, like organising social events, or helping a friend - it's not always easy to see how not to do them, especially if not doing them affects other people.

One way to get things in perspective is to think about the consequences if we didn't do them. For instance, what would be the consequences of:

- \* not organising your club's social? (Someone else would do it? It wouldn't get done?)
- \* not checking your Facebook for a whole morning? (you miss coffee with your friend? But she would have texted you if it was really important...)
- \* not submitting your essay on time? (You might fail your course? Or lose 10% of your marks? Would that be a problem?)
- \* not letting the dog out before you go to your lecture? (how much more time might it take to clear up....)

As you can see, thinking about consequences can be useful when deciding priorities!

## Some possible strategies

Once you've worked out what it is that's using your time, you can decide on a strategy to deal with it. Here are a few ideas from students at the University of Reading. Browse through them on this page **or download them as a printable list:**

If you have any tried and tested strategies for dealing with distractions, **let us know** - your ideas could appear on this page to help other students.

<b>Instant messaging and emails</b>	<p>"Keep yourself logged out while studying."</p> <p>"I switch on the pop-up blocker and mute the volume so I don't get distracted by alerts."</p> <p>"Fix a time when you're going to look at your emails and messages, and how long you're going to spend on them - then set an alarm so you know when to stop."</p>
<b>Phone calls and texts</b>	<p>"Mute your phone and put it somewhere you can't see it! Check it when you have a break from study."</p> <p>"Set up your voicemail to say that you'll be free at certain times, so your mum doesn't worry if she doesn't get an answer."</p>
<b>Facebook/Bebo/MySpace</b>	<p>"An application like <b>Leechblock</b> is good. It temporarily restricts the amount of time you're allowed to spend on certain websites. It's a good trick to use to break the habit and prove to yourself that the world doesn't stop turning if you don't check your Facebook every five minutes."</p>
<b>Surfing the net</b>	<p>"Unplug your ethernet cable or disable your wi-fi."</p> <p>"If you need to use the net for research, list the questions you need answered before you start, and stick to it."</p>
<b>Computer games</b>	<p>"Work somewhere very public like the library, or your department so you're not tempted."</p> <p>"If the games you've playing are online, you could use <b>Leechblock</b> to reduce the amount of time you spend on them. Or disable your internet connection."</p>
<b>Television</b>	<p>"Check the schedules for the things you really want to watch and set reminders on your mobile. Or record them to watch later."</p> <p>"Get out of the habit of turning the telly on when you walk into a room!"</p>
<b>Food and drink</b>	<p>"When I'm working at home, the kettle's always calling me! So I fill a vacuum flask at the beginning of my study session and keep it on my desk so I don't get up and lose my concentration."</p>

<b>Tidying your room and other chores</b>	"I fix a time to do these after lunch when my brain doesn't work so well. That way I'm not persuading myself that I HAVE to get them out of the way before I start studying."
<b>Family commitments</b>	"If I'm not careful I end up giving my family half my attention all the time (and not really focusing on study with the other half). I think it helps to give them my undivided attention for some of the time, then they're more likely to understand when I have to work."
<b>Housework</b>	"Lower your standards! Washing up once a day is fine, and no-one needs ironed duvet covers."  "I just had to tell myself, well, I've worked hard to get to university, and I deserve to have the time to study and get good marks. I'll clean the cooker when I graduate!"