Oops, I Got Distracted

Susan Lee

Zane State College
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If I had a dollar for every time I got distracted . . . I wish I had a puppy. Although we may not experience it quite to this extent, distraction is something we composition students all fight against in our efforts to get started with our essays, do the final revisions, and turn in those assignments before the deadlines. While we know that focus and concentrated effort are essential to any serious accomplishment, this doesn’t make us less susceptible to the charm of the numerous distractions which seem determined to draw us in every time we sit down to write. Our greatest dilemma may be that we are drawn to distraction like bees to honey. We enjoy being diverted from the often difficult task of putting our thoughts and feelings into words. One author admits, “Writers have always secretly welcomed distractions, though we never had so many to choose from as now” (Berger, 2014, p. 60). Although we often face the distraction of physical discomfort, the call of the to-do list, the appeal of social media, and interferences from our surroundings, there are strategies we can use that can help us to say no to these challenging disruptions when they arise, and to find the focus we need.

First of all, attempting to write while being physically uncomfortable can create a distraction difficult to ignore. Whether the cause of our discomfort is hunger, thirst, sleepiness, or needing the restroom, it greatly reduces our ability to focus and can derail the efforts of even the most diligent composition student. I confess that my recurring distraction is hunger. The mere thought of revising an essay is enough to make me start craving popcorn, Reese’s peanut butter cups, or tortilla chips with guacamole. If those particular snacks aren’t available, I’ll settle for anything edible to be found in the refrigerator! Writing well, while battling hunger pains or experiencing physical discomfort for any other reason, is nearly impossible. However, we could very likely avoid distractions of this nature by grabbing a bottle of water, eating a quick snack,
and making a quick jaunt to the restroom before we get settled in to begin. If we find sleepiness to be a problem and aren’t able to get a good night’s sleep before working on our composition assignments, a little caffeine-induced energy may be just the thing. Though it may take a few extra moments to ensure that we are comfortable before we get started on our essays, doing this will make the possibility of getting distracted later much less likely.

Secondly, a distraction we often face as we sit down to invest some much needed time into our waiting essays is that parade of thoughts marching through our minds of all the things we could be doing instead. When our minds are filled with worry that we will forget an important task or with stress about the things waiting to be done, our ability to focus disintegrates rapidly. Before we know it, we have given in to procrastination and fallen into the less-than-productive cycle of flitting from one unfinished task to the next in an effort to distract ourselves from the thing we most need to accomplish. Usually, when I know that an essay is waiting for my attention, I become convinced that reorganizing my closet would be a delightful task and that the home decor project I began last year simply must be done today. Heck, even cleaning that cluttered basement sounds like a great idea! Whenever we find that our mental to-do lists are high-jacking our writing or revising efforts, it might help us to keep our focus if we would grab a piece of paper and jot down the ideas so that they can be done later. (*Later* being the key word!) Often, after we have the jobs in a neat list in front of us, we are able to turn and give our full attention to our composition assignments once again, without worrying that we will forget an important task or idea.

Furthermore, social media can be a powerful distraction and can quickly undermine our productivity. It doesn’t take much to cause our attention to stray to the last thing we posted on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram and to wonder how many likes or retweets we have gotten since
we checked it ten minutes ago. What makes this distraction so difficult to avoid is the fact that we have the common social media outlets so readily available on our phones and our personal computers, both of which we often use when working on composition assignments. For me, it usually happens just as I’m getting an assignment underway. I open my laptop, pull up my essay, and immediately one of those oh-so-alluring Facebook notifications pops up and begs for my attention. I see that it’s a funny comment on my latest post. I have the perfect comeback and know it will only take one moment to reply, so before I know it I’ve pulled up the app. Forty-five minutes later, I am jolted back to the present and to the realization that I’ve just wasted valuable study time looking at photos of the chicken salad sandwich Fred had for lunch, laughing at Minion memes, and watching videos of someone else’s cat! Pinterest can be even more difficult to ignore because time spent on Pinterest doesn’t really feel like wasted time. Often, after an hour or more, I’ve collected several creative ideas for my next project as well as pinned several dozen mouthwatering recipes. The only drawback is that I have not gotten any further on that wretched essay revision! It is clear that social media can be a serious distraction. However, silencing our ring tones, turning off our notifications, or even turning our phones and computers to airplane mode for an hour or so should decrease the chances of our composing efforts being disrupted by social media.

Lastly, a challenge we often face when attempting to spend any amount of time in focused writing is the distraction of our surroundings. This one can come in as many forms as there are locations in which to write. We may be distracted by an attention-loving pet, a fellow student, a television blaring across the room, or even the friendly stranger at the next table who just won’t stop talking. When we have the option of choosing a solitary writing nook, it is wise to do so. Wyrick (2014) suggests,
Find a suitable place to work, one that is comfortable but not too cozy or near distractions. Although it may be tempting to write as you flop on a couch or prop up in bed, the time-to-begin function in your brain will probably turn on quicker if you are sitting upright at a desk or table, squarely facing the task at hand. (p. 99)

This means that it is important to select a comfy, quiet spot where we’re unlikely to be interrupted and lose our concentration. Sometimes, however, we do not have the luxury of a personal writing space. For example, I have four younger siblings who all love to spend time with me, so when I am working on an essay at home, no matter where I am, they eventually find me. It’s hard to say no to these interruptions because listening to my little brother tell about his day’s adventures is usually more interesting than revising the sentence structure in my essay or attempting to find punctuation errors. In those times when we find ourselves writing in larger, more public places, it can be helpful to block ourselves off from the people around us in some way. Newman (2014) proposes strategically setting up our own barriers with books, plants, or screens. When that isn’t possible, even wearing earbuds can give the “Don’t interrupt” signal to any would-be conversationalists (p. 139).

Although encountering some form of disruption while attempting to give focused attention to our writing or revising efforts is a part of reality for each of us, distraction doesn’t need to dominate our writing time. Whether we frequently battle the distraction of physical discomfort, that worrisome to-do list, social media, or our surroundings, responding proactively can help us eliminate these distractions and maintain our concentration. The answer may be as simple as taking a break, eating a snack, silencing the phone, or moving to a different study location. So, the next time we feel as if our brains are being pulled in a thousand directions
despite all our exertions to the contrary, we don’t need to panic. If we stop, take a deep breath, and look around, we may discover that the solution we need is right in front of us.
References

