**ANALYSIS**

**Digital distraction: Apps and tips to help you focus**

**Shutting down the internet altogether can have big benefits**

By Ramona Pringle, [CBC News](http://www.cbc.ca/news/cbc-news-online-news-staff-list-1.1294364) Posted: Dec 10, 2015 4:28 PM ET Last Updated: Dec 10, 2015 5:26 PM ET



When students bring their personal computers to class, they bring the entire world with them — on Facebook, Twitter, Twitch, YouTube, Etsy… and probably Tinder.

So, what are strategies for regaining focus when there are so many apps and digital temptations vying for our attention?

Well, it turns out, there are some apps that can actually help you focus.

[**RescueTime**](https://www.rescuetime.com/) is a website with personal analytics software that tracks what you do online, including how much time you spend on different websites and apps, so you can see how you're procrastinating and where you're wasting your time when you're supposed to be focusing.

Once you've identified which sites are sucking your time, [**Anti Social**](https://anti-social.cc/)and [**Keep Me Out**](http://keepmeout.com/en/) are two different sites that will help you steer clear of them. If you're studying for your final exam or writing a big research paper, you can enter in how long you want to focus for and which websites you want help avoiding. Keep Me Out will block you from those sites until the timer is up.

If you really can't resist those digital distractions, the app [**Freedom**](https://freedom.to/) prevents users from connecting to the internet at all.

And it turns out, that's not a bad idea.

Research by psychologists at Princeton University has shown that ditching your laptop in class and opting for handwritten notes actually helps you learn. It may be a bit counterintuitive, but we can type faster than we can write. That would seem good, except that when we type, we're able to just transcribe a lecture word for word, [whereas handwritten notes require that you synthesize ideas and really listen for the key concepts.](https://www.ideapod.com/idea/Handwriting-helps-you-learn-more/55f26bb5f33d146779b71535)

**App-free options**

Finally, if you want to try to manage your attention without an app, be kind to yourself and set realistic goals. Put away any distractions like a phone or computer so that you can focus — whether it is on studying, or if you're at work, on the task at hand, or even the people in the room with you — but don't set unrealistic expectations.

Start with little sprints: spend 15 minutes on your focused task and then reward yourself with a break. Those sprints can get longer, but what you want to condition in yourself is the capacity to be fully present and to be in control of how and where you focus your attention.

Recently, researchers coined the term "phubbing" to explain the phenomenon of how the mere presence of a phone can cause distraction, and can harm the social dynamic of the people having a conversation. The term is a mashup of the words phone and snubbing.

But phubbing isn't just something that happens in romantic relationships, it's changing our dynamics with our friends, our colleagues, our teachers… and when it comes to the classroom, ourselves.

Even if we think we can pay attention while multitasking, recent research has shown we can't. So when your laptop is open, and you're taking notes, but you also happen to have a half dozen other tabs open, if your goal is to focus on the task at hand, you're phubbing yourself.

**Food for Thought:**

1. In two years, the majority of you will be enrolled in college or university studies. The material will be more intense than what you are studying now, and will require you to be “fully present and to be in control of how and where you focus your attention” for large amounts of time.
2. Realistically, how long can you go without checking your phone when you are reading or working on a project? (understanding, analysing)
3. What strategies can you use to develop longer focusing stamina? What will work for you? (analysing, evaluating)
4. Are you “phubbing” yourself by constantly accessing media? What do you miss out on, do you think? (analysing)