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**Distraction: not the usual suspects**

Posted on May 11, 2015 by Jo VanEvery [Leave a Comment](http://jovanevery.ca/distraction-not-the-usual-suspects/#respond)

Distraction is the enemy of productivity. There is all kinds of time management and productivity advice telling you to track what you are doing and get rid of all the meaningless tasks that don’t contribute to moving your project forward. There are apps and strategies for doing that.

**But are you focused on the right culprits?**

I bet when I say distraction, your first thought is social media: Twitter, Facebook, going down rabbit holes from one blog post to the next, getting worked up about that article in the newspaper …

You may already have [Freedom](https://macfreedom.com/" \t "_blank) or [Anti-Social](http://anti-social.cc/" \t "_blank) installed on your device to prevent that kind of distraction.

I’ve read enough mystery novels and watched enough detective series on TV to know that the first and most obvious suspect is rarely the one who did it. I’ve also been a feminist long enough to know that sometimes focusing on the most talked about danger may actually put you at higher risk.

**What if social media is not really your biggest distraction problem?**

At the end of a recent session of [A Meeting With Your Writing](http://jovanevery.ca/mwyw/" \t "_blank) a couple of examples of distraction came up that are not the usual suspects but probably widespread. (Names changed to protect the innocent.)

Viola reported that she knew that what her project needed that day was to get narrative down. She didn’t want to get bogged down with details until she did.

Denise reported that she was getting distracted by wordsmithing and the anxiety about what comes next.

Carina said she has been distracted from copy editing by bigger ideas and new arguments.

All of these are examples of being distracted from a specific task by another important task.

In order to bring a writing project to completion you need to have *both* the narrative *and* the details. The final version will require careful attention to detail. That detail is in the service of a bigger picture with a clear argument and narrative.

**On any particular occasion you can only focus on a small piece of the project.**

The trick is to stay focused for whatever length of time you have decided. You will come to that other important piece in another session.

This is why I ask “What does this project need?” and get you to pick *one* of those needs. That’s where you want your focus for today.

It is also why I ask “How can you optimize your focus and attention?”. You can identify some of the possible culprits based on what you know about past sessions and plan some strategies in advance.

**Some possible strategies for staying focused:**

Write down your focus for this session and put it somewhere you can see it; a physical reminder that will help bring you back when you get distracted.

Denise makes a detailed outline of what she wants to do during the time at the beginning. When that anxiety pops up, she goes back to the outline and does the next step.

Open a separate document to note things that will need to be done but are not your focus right now. Jot down a note. Go back to your main document. You won’t forget. It can stop poking you. (This also works when you are being distracted by other important things you need to do that have nothing to do with this writing project.)

Stop. Get up and do something else to clear your head and reset. Then sit back down, remind yourself of your focus, and continue.

When Viola found herself getting distracted she got up to walk around, wash face, etc.

It’s like a meditation practice. The goal is not to not be distracted, but rather to notice the distraction, let it go, and return to the breath/writing.

**Share your strategies**

If you have an example and/or a strategy you’ve been using to share, please share in the comments.

**A Meeting With Your Writing**

If scheduled writing time helps you stay focused, you might find [A Meeting With Your Writing](http://jovanevery.ca/mwyw/" \t "_blank) useful. Registration is now open for the May-August semester. We meet every Monday and Thursday at 10 a.m. EST/ 7 a.m. PST via conference call and then write for 90 minutes. You can come to both sessions or pick whatever one works best for you.