# How to Do: Practical Applications of *Deep Work*

Dylan Martin, October 2019

# Deep Work

Coined in 2012 by Cal Newport (he wrote a book about it)
- Deep work represents "Professional activity performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate." (Newport)

We don't come by this style of work naturally; if we're not intentional, our days are likely to be filled with "shallow work"
- "Non-cognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted. These efforts tend to not create new value in the world and are easy to replicate." (Newport)

# Why practice deep work?

In the present and future, excellence won't be achieved by scratching the surface. As information expands and shifts, keeping up involves learning hard things quickly and applying that knowledge to produce work that's exceptional.

- "The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy." (Newport)

# Overview

- Learn how to practice deep work
- Enhance your ability to do deep work
- Free yourself from digital distractions
- Purge shallow work from your life
- Start your practice

# Learn how to practice deep work

- Choose a strategy
- Build a routine
- Execute a grand gesture
- Work collaboratively with others
- Operate like a CEO
- Prioritize downtime

# Learn how to practice deep work: Choose your strategy

| Deep Work Scheduling Philosophy | Newport's Description | In Action |
|---|---|---|
| The Monastic Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling | "This philosophy attempts to maximize deep efforts by eliminating or radically minimizing shallow obligations." | Focus nearly all of your time on deep work.<br><br>Example: spend every workday solely on high leverage activities, rejecting all other things that arise. |
| The Bimodal Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling | "This philosophy asks that you divide your time, dedicating some clearly defined stretches to deep pursuits and leaving the rest open to everything else." | Split your time, on an annual, monthly, or weekly basis into "deep work" and "shallow work".<br><br>Example: Devote Fall and Winter to deep work and Spring and Summer to shallow work. |
| The Rhythmic Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling | "This philosophy argues that the easiest way to consistently start deep work sessions is to transform them into a simple regular habit." | Look at your day and divide it into deep work and shallow work.<br><br>Example: mornings for deep work and evenings for shallow work. |
| The Journalistic Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling | "...fit deep work wherever you can into your schedule" | Practice deep work, sporadically, when your schedule allows for it.<br><br>Example: If a meeting is cancelled or you unexpectedly finish something early, devote this time to deep work. |

# Monastic

The Monastic Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling is the most dedicated form of deep work and involves spending all of your working hours on a singular high-level focus.

- While this philosophy has the highest potential for reward and the lowest level of context-switching, it's unrealistic for most people who are required to perform various kinds of work in their role. It also blocks the potential for new opportunities as your default response to commitments that arise is, "no".

# Bimodal

The Bimodal Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling allows for a high amount of deep work while enabling you to maintain other activities in your life that you find valuable.

- ○ Successfully adopting this philosophy requires the flexibility to arrange your year, months, or weeks as you see fit into larger chunks of deep work.

# Rhythmic

The Rhythmic Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling is ideal for individuals with a fairly static schedule.

- If you can anticipate what most of your days will look like, it's feasible to block off several hours every day for deep work, thereby getting into a daily "rhythm", and leaving the rest of your hours for shallow work.

# Journalistic

The Journalistic Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling is an option for people who are constantly on the move with little to no regularity to their days.

- This method demands vigilance with your time and the keen ability to notice natural ebbs and flows in your day where you may be able to fit in 30 minutes or an hour or two of deep work.
- This method is not really for beginners and is likely to fail for people who are not experienced in deep work.

## Learn how to practice deep work:
## Build a routine

- Location
- Duration
- Structure
- Requirements

- Location
  - I will work at my desk with my headphones on
- Duration
  - My session will be 2 45-minute blocks with a 5-minute break in between
- Structure
  - My phone and slack will be on DND and I'll be focused only on my text editor.  My job is to write unit tests for this service I finished in the morning
- Requirements
  - I'll drink water and coffee.  I'll listen to "Lo-Fi Beats" on Spotify.

"By leveraging a radical change to your normal environment, coupled perhaps with a significant investment of effort or money, all dedicated toward supporting a deep work task, you increase the perceived importance of the task."

- Free/Low Cost Gestures
- Mid/High-Cost Gestures

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- Free/Low Cost Gestures
    - Ask to WFH for a few days to knock something out
    - Change your scenery to a coffee shop or a coworking space
    - Book a conference room at work to lock in with your team
- Mid/High-Cost Gestures

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- Mid/High-Cost Gestures
  - Book a hotel room for a weekend to focus on a side project
  - Rent a cabin in a quiet location for a few days
  - Live in a shipping truck so that you're forced to work anywhere but your home (extreme but real example: Google Engineer lives in a moving truck

# Learn how to practice deep work: Collaborate with others

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Making time to engage in interesting conversations with others and then retreating to deep work mode.

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Attempting to simultaneously juggle conversations while working.

**Learn how to practice deep work:**
**Operate like a CEO**

- Focus on the wildly important
- Act on the lead measure
- Keep a compelling scoreboard
- Create a cadence of accountability

- Focus on the wildly important
    - Direct your effort to your most important goals during your deep work hours.
    - Keep your biggest objectives at the forefront of your mind to make it easier to ignore distractions that don't serve your long term goals.
    - Try using sticky notes on your desk that list out your top priorities so you don't forget them.
- Act on the lead measure
- Keep a compelling scoreboard
- Create a cadence of accountability

- Focus on the wildly important
- Act on the lead measure
  - While you can attempt to maximize your lagging measure (i.e. number of blog posts published) it may be more valuable to optimize for your lead measure (i.e. number of hours spent writing in deep work).
  - By increasing the number of hours you spend per week in a state of focused concentration, you'll naturally be in a strong position to accomplish what you set out to.
- Keep a compelling scoreboard
- Create a cadence of accountability

- Focus on the wildly important
- Act on the lead measure
- Keep a compelling scoreboard
  - Keep count of how many hours you spend in deep work mode and display your tracking somewhere visible to keep you motivated.
  - Newport suggests keeping a pen and paper tally of how many hours you spend on deep work. Alternately, you can automate your scoreboard with time tracking tools like [RescueTime](#).
- Create a cadence of accountability

## Learn how to practice deep work:
## Operate like a CEO

- Focus on the wildly important
- Act on the lead measure
- Keep a compelling scoreboard
- Create a cadence of accountability
  - In the absence of an accountability buddy, keep your word to yourself by committing to daily or weekly reviews of your progress.
  - Check in on your scorecard and assess why you may be falling short of the goals you've set. If you're exceeding them with ease, it may be time to push yourself further.

## Downtime improves our thinking
- "Providing your conscious brain rest enables your unconscious mind to take a shift sorting through your most complex professional challenges"

## Downtime replenishes us
- Re-entering deep work is much easier with a rested brain

## Deep work is finite (Newport suggests there's an upper limit of four hours a day)
- Implement a shutdown ritual that gives your mind a clear signal that work is done and that you can transition to "processing mode"

# Enhance your ability to do deep work

- Make focus your "default setting"
- Add the pressure of time
- Make space for deep thinking
- Practice memory games

Set up blocks of time to answer emails rather than keeping your inbox open

Resist the temptation to check distracting sites during deep work mode

- Set up domain blacklists that take extra effort to configure + turn off (Use site-blocking apps like [Self Control](#) and [Freedom](#) to access the internet at set intervals)
- We need internet for a lot of our deep work, so set up domain blacklists

Deep work is intensified by self-imposed time limits (the "procrastination factor")

- Estimate a time goal for a task (prototyping an API: 3 hours), then halve it and try and do as much as you can

Start small by trying out this method once a week, and start adding these interval sessions more frequently.

# Enhance your ability to do deep work: Make space for deep thinking

| Problem | How it looks | What to do |
|---|---|---|
| **Distracting thoughts** | While attempting to focus on a single problem, you experience intruding thoughts about everything from the emails in your inbox to what you'll eat for dinner.<br><br>Example: "When I get back to my inbox, I'll answer Jenny's email first…" | Practice bringing your focus back by telling yourself you'll address your other thoughts later and repeatedly bring your attention back to the problem you're working through. |
| **Mental looping** | While working through a problem, you come back to what you already know about it repeatedly without new breakthroughs.<br><br>Example: "The introduction of my blog post will start with an anecdote about Jim. Not sure how I'll proceed to my next section…Jim's story will make a good opener though." | Recognize your lopping thought pattern and direct your focus to the next step. Don't allow yourself to dwell on what you know. |

Working on your memory is yet another tactic Newport recommends to prime your mind for deep work

- Practice memorizing a deck of cards
- Learn a song or poem by heart
- Commit a list of words in a foreign language to memory
- Memorize the order of a stack of books

# Free yourself from Digital Distractions

- Choose your digital toolset wisely
- Stop using social media
- Find replacements for internet entertainment

- Newport suggests that "to master the art of deep work…you must take back control of your time and attention from the many diversions that attempt to steal them."
- This means being more selective about the tools we use, rejecting the "Any-Benefit Approach to Network Tool Selection" and embracing the "The Craftsman Approach to Tool Selection".

- The Any–Benefit Approach to Network Tool Selection
  - You're justified in using a network tool if you can identify any possible benefit to its use, or anything you might possibly miss out on if you don't use it.
- The Craftsman Approach to Tool Selection
  - Identify the core factors that determine success and happiness in your professional and personal life. Adopt a tool only if its positive impacts on these factors substantially outweigh its negative impacts.

1. Identify your most important goals at work and in life
2. List the top 2-3 activities required to achieve each goal
3. Assess each tool you presently use to see if they have a significantly positive impact, significantly negative impact, or neutral impact on the activities you outlined above
4. Eliminate the tools that do not have a significantly positive impact that outweighs the negative impacts

1. Goals
   a. My professional goal is to learn web design
   b. My personal goal is to establish a regular workout routine
2. Top 2-3 Activities required to achieve it
   a. Web design
      i. Work through freeCodeCamp's 300 hour responsive web design certificate: 1 hr/day
      ii. Read Jon Duckett's HTML & CSS: Designing and Building Web Sites - 15 pages/day
      iii. Watch web design tutorials online
   b. Personal
      i. Run 3x a week
      ii. Daily stretching at home to avoid injury
      iii. Document my workouts and progress to stay motivated
3. Current Network Tools
   a. Facebook - professional: negative // personal: neutral
   b. Twitter - professional: neutral // personal: neutral
   c. Strava - professional: neutral // personal: positive
   d. YouTube - professional: positive // personal: neutral
4. Eliminate: Facebook & Twitter // Keep: Strava & YouTube

- In [Digital Minimalism](), Newport recommends a self-imposed social media ban for 30 days
  - We can all acknowledge that Social Media is fun, but it's also hella distracting
- After 30 days, Newport suggests asking yourself the following questions about each platform you resolved not to use
  - "Would the last thirty days have been notably better if I had been able to use this service?"
  - "Did people care that I wasn't using this service?"
- You may be surprised by the answers :) I deleted Instagram and Snapchat and I don't miss either

# Free yourself from Digital Distractions: Find replacements for Internet

| Low-Quality Forms of Leisure 🥲 | High-Quality Forms of Leisure 😍 |
| --- | --- |
| Watching TV | Playing/learning a musical instrument |
| Checking Facebook | Hiking in nature/walking in the city |
| Browsing Reddit | Reading a book |
| Scrolling on Insta | Hanging out with friends IRL |
| Binging Netflix | Cooking |

# Purge shallow work from your life

- Schedule your day methodically
- Assign grades to your work
- Get your boss on board
- Limit your workday
- Make yourself inaccessible
- Don't respond(!!)

Practice [timeboxing](#).  While this may sound drastic to some, this time-blocking approach to productivity isn't as extreme as it sounds.

- Divide your work day into blocks and assign activities to each one (including room for meals and breaks). This method also forces you to be thoughtful about batching similar tasks.
- For instance, if you have two people you need to call and three people you need to email, combine those tasks into one block of shallow work after a deep work session.e

## Common gotchas
- You incorrectly estimate how long tasks will take
- New tasks arise displacing what you initially planned

These should be taken in stride rather than frustrate you. Over time, you'll become better at estimating how long a task will take and can learn to default to overestimation.
- You can also make use of "overflow conditional blocks" where you add buffer slots to your schedule if you don't know how long something will take.

# Purge shallow work from your life: Schedule your day methodically

## Morning ☕

| | |
|---|---|
| **06:00 AM – 08:00 AM** | Deep Work Session - Update UI design mock-ups for the new iOS feature based on feedback |
| **08:00 AM – 09:00 AM** | Get ready to go to the office, breakfast, commute |
| **09:00 AM – 10:00 AM** | Weekly Design Meeting |
| **10:00 AM – 10:30 AM** | Overflow Block<br>1. Use if meeting goes over time<br>2. Or coffee & respond to emails |
| **10:30 AM –12:00 PM** | Deep Work Session - Create a new design spec for feature parity between iOS/Android |

## Afternoon 🌥️

| | |
|---|---|
| **12:00 PM – 01:00 PM** | Have lunch with my mentee, Laura |
| **01:00 PM – 02:30 PM** | Deep Work Session - Review Lian's work and provide detailed feedback |
| **02:30 PM – 04:00 PM** | Catch-up on emails and send emails to Loretta and Clyde about sponsoring the 99U event |
| **04:00 PM – 04:30 PM** | Leave work, pick up Jacob from after-school program, and commute to the soccer field |

## Evening 🌙

| | |
|---|---|
| **06:00PM – 08:00PM** | Leave soccer match, pick up dinner on the way home, eat, family time, and clean-up |
| **08:00 PM – 09:00 PM** | Read The Master and the Margarita |
| **09:00 PM – 10:00 PM** | Shower, prep for tomorrow, go to bed |

Assigning a simple "deep" or "shallow" grade to the work you have planned is a quick way to determine where you should focus your time most intently.

Here are a few questions you can ask yourself to determine if a task qualifies as deep work:

- Does this task require focused attention?
- Does this task require specialized training or knowledge?
- Does this task create new value in the world?
- Would this task be difficult to replicate?

# Purge shallow work from your life:
## Assign grades to your work

| Examples of Shallow Work | Examples of Deep Work |
|---|---|
| Processing the emails in your inbox | Drafting a launch plan for a new feature |
| Responding to colleagues on team chat tools like Slack | Programming |
| Making phone calls to arrange logistics | Preparing for an upcoming keynote presentation |
| Attending status update meetings | Researching information on a specific problem |

The modern workplace is biased towards shallow work.
- Companies make little to no effort to quantify the costs of shallow work, failing to recognize the dollar amount lost when skilled people don't focus on deep work.
- They default to the status quo of constant connectivity and regularly occurring meetings instead of prioritizing long-term impact.

However, all hope is not lost.
- Many are open to the idea of minimizing distractions at work and allowing deep work to flourish. Your boss might be one of them.
  - Explain the concept of deep work and shallow work to them, using examples from your own typical workday. Then, ask them this question: "What percentage of my time should be spent on shallow work?"

## Purge shallow work from your life:
## Limit your workday

Rather than working ridiculous hours to accomplish your goals, constrain yourself to a typical eight-hour work day that forces you to be ruthless choosing where to spend your time and energy.

Remove shallow work from your schedule, don't entertain opportunities that do little to serve your goals, and be liberal in your use of the word "no". With limited time at your disposal, you'll need to be methodical in how you plan.

- As Newport notes, "A commitment to fixed-schedule productivity...shifts you into a scarcity mindset". This necessarily makes you consider how you spend your time more wisely and raises the bar for what gets your attention and what is relegated the unimportant pile.
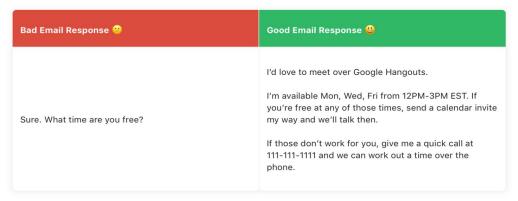
## Make Senders Do More Work When They Email You
- Make senders work for your email addresses; don't list it publicly or have it on your website.
- Ask senders to filter themselves by having different emails or separate contact forms for different queries

## Do More When You Send or Respond to Emails
- Reduce the back-and-forth of emails with a "process-centric approach to email". By sending more thorough and complete correspondence, you'll close the loop more quickly.

| Bad Email Response 😐 | Good Email Response 😃 |
| --- | --- |
| Sure. What time are you free? | I'd love to meet over Google Hangouts.<br><br>I'm available Mon, Wed, Fri from 12PM-3PM EST. If you're free at any of those times, send a calendar invite my way and we'll talk then.<br><br>If those don't work for you, give me a quick call at 111-111-1111 and we can work out a time over the phone. |

Not every email that lands in your inbox requires a response.

- For some the default line of thinking is that "it's the sender's responsibility to convince the receiver that a reply is worthwhile".
- However, this is a controversial belief. Some suggest that not responding to emails is rude and others recommend never responding to your emails at all.

These three rules may help you find a middle ground. Newport recommends the following:

- It's ambiguous or otherwise makes it hard for you to generate a reasonable response.
- It's not a question or proposal that interests you.
- Nothing really good would happen if you did respond and nothing really bad would happen if you didn't.

# References

- [Todoist](#)
- [RescueTime](#)
- [Digital Minimalism](#)
- [Deep Work](#)

# Start your deep work practice

Be kind to yourself
- This stuff is hard to transition into, and you're not going to be perfect at some of these approaches right out of the gate.

Get a todoist account (https://todoist.com/) and download this template to get started!
- http://bit.ly/todoist-deep-work-template

# Questions?