HOW TO FOCUS: THE 7 RULES

19 LONG INTERVIEWS AND TALKS	**24** HOURS	**1,204** PIECES OF ADVICE	**7** RULES, IN ORDER

In the order you use them: **rule 1 comes before you start.**

TAKES 10 SECONDS

1 DECIDE FIRST
Decide what you're focusing on, and for how long, before you start.

2 ONE THING AT A TIME
One thing at a time, all the way through. Every switch costs more than it feels like.

3 CHANGE THE ROOM
Get the distractions out of reach before you start.

4 SIT WITH THE ITCH
When you want to switch, it's usually a feeling talking.

5 BLOCKS, AND A SLOW START
An hour to ninety minutes, work that stretches you, and a first ten minutes that feel bad.

6 TRAIN THE RETURN
Don't try to stop wandering. Notice it, and come back.

7 REST IS PART OF FOCUS
Real breaks, away from screens, and enough sleep.

Not on the list: trying harder. Every rule changes what you do before and around the work, not how hard you force it.

START WITH RULE ONE.

IN DETAIL: PAGES 2 AND 3 ▶

THE 7 RULES IN DETAIL

In 2004, people looked at one screen for two and a half minutes on average before switching. Today it is about 47 seconds. Gloria Mark, who has studied attention at work for more than twenty years, measured both.

The experts agree that our focus is slipping; they disagree on why. The advice here comes from 19 long interviews and talks, 24 hours, 1,204 pieces of advice, sorted into what holds up.

Seven rules, in the order you use them: before, during and after the work.

TAKES 10 SECONDS

1 RULE 1 DECIDE FIRST

Decide what you're focusing on, and for how long, before you start.

- You can't be distracted from nothing: "if you don't have a plan, you can't be distracted" (**Ali Abdaal**). A distraction only pulls you away from something you decided to do.
- Not a vague "work on the report". The actual thing, and for how long.
- A time box: a fixed stretch for one task. Finish the box "even if you're just sitting there staring into space"; nothing else gets in (**Nir Eyal**).
- **Cal Newport** gives "a job every minute" of his workday.

2 RULE 2 ONE THING AT A TIME

One thing at a time, all the way through. Every switch costs more than it feels like.

- **Sahar Yousef**'s pen-and-paper test: write "I'm a great multitasker", then the numbers 1 to 20. Then the same again, switching: one letter, one number. **17.72 seconds against 41.35**, and full of mistakes. Same work; the only difference is the switching.
- Students who multitask with media all day are "even bad at multitasking" (**Clifford Nass**, Stanford).
- On a screen the cost doesn't end when you switch back: about 25 minutes, on average, before you're back on the interrupted task (**Gloria Mark**). One interruption leads to the next.

3 RULE 3 CHANGE THE ROOM

Get the distractions out of reach before you start.

- The phone is a slot machine you carry everywhere (**Cal Newport**).
- You wouldn't put a drink in front of someone trying to quit (**Sahar Yousef**). So don't put your phone next to your work. Another room is best. Notifications off. Some people make the phone grey, so it's less fun to look at.
- Apps are built to keep us scrolling: "like someone is pouring itching powder over us all day", and then telling us to meditate (**Johann Hari**, *Stolen Focus*).
- Change the room, not your willpower.

RULES 4 TO 7 ON PAGE 3 ▶

4 RULE 4
SIT WITH THE ITCH

Learn to sit with the itch. When you want to switch, it's usually a feeling talking.

- **Nir Eyal** (*Indistractable*) says external triggers cause only 10% of our distractions; the other 90% start inside us.
- We don't reach for the phone because it buzzed, but to escape a feeling: boredom, stress, a sentence that won't come. Take the phone away, and you'll find something else.
- "You can actually tolerate boredom better than your mind can" (**Dr. K, Alok Kanojia**). When the itch comes, notice it, and wait.
- **Chris Bailey** made himself bored an hour a day for a month. After about a week his mind adjusted, and his attention span grew.
- **Newport** doesn't look at his phone in the pharmacy queue, so his brain learns it won't always get something new.

Hari or Eyal? Both are right: one fixes the room (rule 3), the other fixes the reach (rule 4).

5 RULE 5
BLOCKS, AND A SLOW START

Work in blocks of an hour to ninety minutes, pick work that stretches you, and expect the first ten minutes to feel bad.

- **Andrew Huberman** sets a timer for 90 minutes and accepts that the first five to ten are a warm-up. Most people quit right there. Push through.
- **Newport** sets aside two-hour blocks for writing, and nothing else goes in them.
- Pick a task whose challenge slightly exceeds your skill: "stretch, but not snap" (**Steven Kotler**). Too easy, and you drift; too hard, and you give up.
- Flow at work is "actually very rare" (**Gloria Mark**). Don't judge a day by whether it showed up.

6 RULE 6
TRAIN THE RETURN

Don't try to stop wandering. Train the return.

- We mind-wander about 50% of our waking moments (**Amishi Jha**, University of Miami). Everyone does.
- The skill is noticing you've wandered, and coming back. That moment is "a win", not a failure (**Jha**).
- Practise it: focus on your breath, notice when you drift, return. Start with 30 seconds and build up to about 12 minutes a day (**Jha**).
- Plainer still: look at one spot for 30 seconds, and add a few seconds each day (**Huberman**).

7 RULE 7
REST IS PART OF FOCUS

Real breaks, away from screens, and enough sleep.

- In a study of different breaks, scrolling was "pretty much the same as not taking a break" (**Sahar Yousef**). Her advice: a walk, outside, no screen.
- Your best ideas rarely come while you're focused: in the shower, on a walk, waiting in line (**Chris Bailey**).
- Plan "negative space" into your day, as important as the time for hard work (**Gloria Mark**).
- Under all of it: at least seven hours of sleep (**Yousef**). No focus trick makes up for missing it.

YOUR NEXT NINETY MINUTES

1. Name the task and the time.
2. Only that task.
3. Phone in another room.
4. Itch? Notice it, and wait.
5. Ride out the first ten minutes.
6. Drifted? Come back.
7. Then a walk, not a scroll.

START WITH RULE ONE.

ALL 7 RULES IN ONE LIST: PAGE 1 ▶