SHORTFORM

Summary of Deep Work

Original book by Cal Newport

Like most people, you're probably easily distracted by wandering thoughts or social media updates while trying to be productive. In *Deep Work*, Cal Newport teaches you how to develop your focus and resist distractions so that you can rise to the top of your field and drive toward your most important goals. **He contends that focus is like a mental muscle**: Through deliberate training, you can strengthen your focus and expand your mental capacity.

Newport explains *why* the ability to do deep work (work that requires intense concentration) is so important in our modern economy, and he shows how to make deep work a part of your life. In addition to exploring Newport's ideas on how to eliminate distractions, this guide adds advice from other authors on how to work *despite* present distractions. We also include practical ways that everyday knowledge workers, not just academics like Newport, can prioritize deep work.

1-Page Summary

Cal Newport defines "deep work" as focused, uninterrupted, *undistracted* work on a task that pushes your cognitive abilities to their limit. In contrast, "shallow work" describes tasks that aren't as cognitively demanding—like answering emails and attending unproductive meetings. These tasks don't create much value and anyone can do them.

(Shortform note: Some of Newport's contemporaries refer to deep work and shallow work as reflective work and reactive work. However, regarding some tasks, the boundary between "reflective" and "reactive" can be confusing. For example, you may think that because emails require you to *reflect* on an adequate response, they count as *reflective* work—though they're shallow work, by Newport's definition.)

Over the past decades, the economy has moved away from brute force labor to analyzing and applying information. Newport explains that skills that succeed in the modern economy—like complex problem solving, data analysis, and computer programming—require deep work to learn and execute. **He argues that your ability to do deep work will determine how much you thrive in the information economy.** Ironically, the same technologies that *built* the information economy are *depleting* our ability to do deep work. Phones, emails, and addictive apps pull us away every few minutes. Thus, at a time when deep work is most important, it's also most difficult.

(Shortform note: These ideas aren't new—Peter Drucker's *The Effective Executive*, published in 1966, discusses the rising "knowledge economy." Drucker's best practices for standing out in the knowledge economy align closely with several deep work practices we'll explore later in this guide, such as cutting out time-wasting activities, scheduling tasks into uninterrupted blocks of time, and focusing on one task at a time.)

This guide is divided into two parts. First, we'll cover the three foundational ideas of deep work and learn about its benefits. Then, we'll explore practices that will help you create a supportive environment for engaging in deep work.

Idea #1: Deep Work Is *Important*

Newport argues that deep work allows you to do two things critical to your performance in the information economy:

1. **Learn and master new skills:** Newport explains that technology and best practices become obsolete quickly in the information economy. In order to stay relevant over decades, you must continue to learn challenging new skills—which requires focus. (Shortform note: Experts have pinpointed several actions that usually lead to skill mastery: First, determine if your goal is attainable and ensure that the skill is relevant to your career. Then, find a method that aligns with your learning style and allows you to take on the skill bit by bit, instead of all at once. Finally, rely on others—find a mentor who can coach you and help you reflect on your progress.)
2. **Apply the skills to increase your output:** Once you've learned a skill, you need to do something useful with it. Consider the simple rule: *High-quality work produced = Time Spent x Intensity of Focus.* (Shortform note: The key here is that what you do with your skill must be *useful*. In *The Effective Executive*, Peter Drucker explains how to determine if your work is *effective*—useful work that improves your performance and comes with application of Newport's rule—or just *efficient*—productivity for the sake of increasing output that's not necessarily useful or high-quality.)

Idea #2: Deep Work Is *Difficult*

Newport explains that deep work is difficult because our world bombards us with near-constant distractions. **He outlines three major ways that modern workplaces derail workers' ability to engage in deep work.**

1. **Open floor plans:** Open floor plans were meant to increase collaboration. But Newport explains that they're a continuously distracting environment, where every conversation is heard, and one person can disrupt dozens of people. (Shortform note: Before the Covid-19 pandemic, many companies were already starting to rethink their open floor plans, finding that putting so many employees in a shared space was creating too much distraction. For these companies, the pandemic highlighted the heightened risk of disease transmission in open shared spaces and accelerated their decision to leave open floor plans behind.)
2. **Instant communication:** With instant-messaging tools like Slack and texting, people can interrupt your work on-demand. According to Newport, as a result of this, we stop being deep thinkers and become human network routers. (Shortform note: We'll look at actionable steps to make instant messaging less distracting in the section on building your deep work environment, for instance using the platform's features to notify senders that you won't be responding immediately.)
3. **Social media:** On social media platforms, conversations continue endlessly, 24/7. The new content you see always seems novel and productive, but it doesn't move you closer to the major things you really care about. (Shortform note: The addictive quality of social media is due to our attraction to *variable rewards*: rewards that happen at random times, rather than in a predictable pattern. You can't predict which refresh of your newsfeed will reward you with interesting information or likes, so the action never loses its appeal.)

Idea #3: Deep Work Is Fulfilling

Shallow work is deceptively bad because it *feels* productive and meaningful. Answering emails feels like you're doing something. Staying on top of the office conversation in Slack makes you feel updated on what's going on. In contrast, **Newport says, deep work *actually* moves you meaningfully toward happiness and fulfillment.** Deep work is when you're most capable of tackling your thorniest problems. Because these problems often yield the largest rewards, deep work is often far more rewarding than shallow work.

(Shortform note: Newport mentions in an interview that he didn't originally intend to include a chapter on the fulfilling aspect of deep work. However, as his research went on, he found so many accounts of people whose deep work practices led to a deeper sense of happiness and fulfillment in their work, he felt that he needed to include it.)

Newport explains that the fulfillment that comes from doing deep work aligns closely with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's ideas on "flow." Csikszentmihalyi, psychologist and author of *Flow*, found that when people concentrate on a worthwhile task that pushes them to their cognitive limit, they experience a state of flow, or a sense of contentment and purpose.

(Shortform note: Because flow occurs when you're working hard at something you believe is important, it naturally would be more likely to happen when you're doing deep work in support of your goals than when you're scrolling through Reddit comments.)

Practice #1: Plan Out Time for Deep Work

After establishing what deep work is and why it's important, Newport moves on to explain different ways to make deep work practices part of your life. The first step is carving out time that you'll dedicate to deep work. He warns that it's difficult to simply *will* yourself to do deep work on demand. **It's more effective to approach deep work with structure, habit, and discipline—in other words, to make deep work a *practiced ritual*.**

The Four Types of Deep Work Scheduling

If you make deep work a ritual or habit, you no longer have to employ your willpower to overcome distraction. Newport says it's most effective to set time aside specifically for focusing on deep work. To be successful at doing deep work in the long term, you'll have to try out different schedules to see what best fits your lifestyle and needs. Newport offers four types of deep work schedules for consideration, each with different time requirements and efficacy.

Schedule Type 1: Seclusion

Remove as many shallow work tasks from your life as possible. Spend nearly all your time on deep work.

- Example: Some authors go off the grid and aren't reachable by email or through social media. All correspondence comes in by postal mail or through their editor.

The advantage of this schedule is that you get extended periods of deep work—it becomes your default working style, not something you have to plan for. However, this isn't feasible for most people, given the requirements of their careers.

(Shortform note: This schedule requires you to avoid all shallow tasks, though often these tasks are a necessary part of life. To handle this, you'll have to learn the essential skill of *delegation*. In *Who Not How*, Dan Sullivan explains that successful delegation depends on finding the best person for the job, instead of finding the best way to do the job. Instead of asking, "*How* can I get my shallow work done with this kind of schedule?" ask, "*Who* can I delegate my shallow work to?")

Schedule Type 2: Periodic

Carve out regular periods each week, month, or entire parts of the year to focus on deep work. The book stresses that the period should be **at least one full day** to reach the maximum intensity of deep work. (As we'll see in the following schedule suggestion, it's possible to do a few daily hours of deep work, but those few hours won't be at the intensity you would achieve in a full day of deep work.)

- Example: You might carve out a three-day block of the week where you aren't contactable while preserving the other two days for shallower work.

The advantage of this schedule is that it's more realistic than the seclusion schedule. Setting aside at least one full day of deep work helps you reach your maximum level of focus. However, despite being more realistic, it's still impractical for many workers, who have to perform certain tasks daily.

(Shortform note: Even if you're a 9-5 office worker, it may be possible to adopt a periodic schedule—especially as companies normalize remote work. In *The Effective Executive*, Peter Drucker recommends working from home at least one day per week, and planning to do your most mentally demanding tasks in this isolated, focused time.)

Schedule Type 3: Daily

Set aside a regular block of time each day to focus on deep work.

- Example: Set aside the morning (such as 8 to 11 a.m.) for deep work, before jumping into shallow work.

The regularity of this schedule is conducive to forming a habit, and it's realistic for many careers and lifestyles. However, this schedule doesn't give the full day of deep work that the seclusion or periodic schedules can provide, and therefore you won't reach your *maximum* focus potential.

(Shortform note: In *The 5 AM Club*, Robin Sharma notes that the most productive part of your day is the hour right after you wake up because you're recharged and the world is relatively quiet and distraction-free. It therefore makes sense to try to schedule your deep work time block in the early morning.)

Schedule Type 4: Ad Hoc

Find some time to do deep work whenever you can get it.

- Example: When on a trip with your family, carve out a few hours to do work before joining them for activities.

This is the most flexible schedule. You can do deep work at any point when it's possible. But, because it's irregular, it's the least successful in setting up a habit. It requires the ability to switch on deep work instantaneously.

(Shortform note: It's difficult to successfully achieve a level of deep work on the ad hoc schedule unless you've trained your ability to switch your "deep work brain" on and off at will—like a journalist, for example—or if you're strongly driven by the belief that your work matters and that you'll succeed. In his book *So Good They Can't Ignore You*, Newport elaborates on *why* having a strong sense of purpose is essential to doing your best work at an exceptional performance level.)

How Much Deep Work Should You Try to Fit Into Your Day?

Newport cautions that there *is* a limit to how much deep work you'll be able to accomplish per day. Anders Ericsson, author of *Peak*, explains that most novices can only accomplish about an hour a day of intense concentration. **Experts who have extensive practice can expand to up to four hours, but rarely are able to exceed this**.

(Shortform note: Newport doesn't discuss circumstances under which people can—and do—concentrate deeply for more than four hours at a time, such as chess grandmasters. Critics point out that this gives Newport a sort of loophole: If someone claims that they're able to do deep work for more than four hours, he can always respond that their work must have *actually* been shallow work.)

Plan Out Your Days

Newport suggests several techniques for making sure you leave yourself enough time for deep work and aren't tempted to engage in shallow work during that time.

Technique #1: Schedule Internet Time

Schedule in advance when you'll use the Internet. Avoid it completely outside these times. Newport gives some tips on how to make the most of this practice:

- Keep a notepad nearby where you record the next time you're scheduled to use the Internet, and any ideas you need to revisit once you're online again.
- Plan your work so you don't need the Internet to make progress. If you get stuck by not being able to access the Internet, then move on to another task. Plan better next time.

- If you do this primarily at work, then don't stop this practice at home after work. This will undo the training you did at work.

(Shortform note: For most knowledge workers, it's not possible to only use the Internet at certain times of the day. But if you must use the Internet all day, try using website-blocking apps like Forest or Self Control to help remove the temptation to switch your attention away from deep work.)

Technique #2: Plan Out Every Minute of Your Day, and Quantify Depth

Next, **plan out everything that you need to do throughout the day.** Newport says that when you set specific goals by planning out what you'll work on in advance, you're less likely to switch to other tasks. He outlines three steps to planning your time in a deep work-supporting way:

1. **Plan your tasks:** Think about the tasks that you need to complete and note what time you plan to complete them. Newport recommends breaking down your tasks into half-hour blocks, making sure to schedule buffer blocks to handle emergencies or tasks that run over their allotted time. (Shortform note: In 2020, Newport released *The Time-Block Planner*, which helps guide readers to create schedules broken down into half-hour increments and in alignment with their goals.)
2. **Quantify depth:** He then says to estimate and note the "deep work" complexity of each task. As a rule of thumb, imagine how long it would take to train a smart college grad to do the task—the more time, the deeper the work. (Shortform note: This heuristic doesn't always work if you've built up a skill to the point that it's routine. For instance, a surgeon operating may not consider a certain procedure deep work.) Once you've finished quantifying the depth of your day's tasks, look over your schedule. If your day is full of shallow tasks, Newport urges you to consider how you can replace those with deeper work.
3. **Reflect on and tweak your schedule:** Newport suggests reviewing the accuracy of your time blocks at the end of each day. This will help you set more accurate goals and expectations in the future. (Shortform note: You may feel discouraged if you aren't able to follow your schedule or give in to distraction. Nir Eyal addresses this feeling in *Indistractable*—he explains that it's essential to think of your schedule as an evolving experiment that you probably won't get right on the first try. Instead of stressing out, think of ways to build a schedule better aligned with your needs.)

Technique #3: Set Ambitious Deadlines

Give yourself intense deadlines that will force you to concentrate at the limit of your ability. Newport recommends estimating how long you'd normally schedule for the task. **Then cut down the time drastically**, and set it as your deadline.

(Shortform note: Intense deadlines not only force you into focus mode but can actually make your work *better*. When you set an ambitious deadline, you create a moderate amount of emotional arousal—which, according to the Yerkes-Dodson Law, is where you achieve peak performance. In other words, people really do "work best under pressure.")

Practice #2: Build Your Deep Work Environment

In addition to scheduling time for deep work, Newport encourages you to build an environment that supports deep work by reducing distraction triggers.

Step 1: Create a Deep-Work-Only Environment

Newport suggests designating a deep work space, where you go *only* to do deep work (like a

conference room, the library, or an office in your home). Compartmentalizing your location this way will cement the habit of deep work more strongly.

(Shortform note: In *Atomic Habits*, James Clear discusses the power of using environmental cues to trigger desirable behaviors. Try adding environmental cues to your space—for example, lighting a specific candle each time you start working. Over time, your brain will associate these cues with deep work, and you'll more easily enter a focused state of mind.)

Step 2: Get Rid of Distractions

Newport points out that a key to spending more time in deep work is to avoid distractions that take you out of deep work.

(Shortform note: You may think that it's not necessary to *cut out* potential distractions, instead opting for simple management techniques like placing your phone face down to avoid looking at notifications. However, studies show that when working on the computer, people become distracted, on average, every 40 seconds. Even if your phone is face down on your desk, it's still an available distraction to reach for.)

Floorplans

Newport argues that the ideal office floor plan is the "hub and spoke" model, in which central hubs—such as meeting rooms, break areas, and cafeterias—allow for communal work and serendipitous meetings and branch off into spokes that lead to quiet, private places for people to do deep work.

(Shortform note: While Newport suggests this model as a solution to the trend of open floor plans, he doesn't give any type of workaround for those who have no control over the layout of their workspace. In *Indistractable*, Nir Eyal suggests that workers who may find themselves in a distracting workspace can try creating visual cues to show others that they need to be left alone. This may look like a certain hat you wear when you're in deep work mode or a small "Do not interrupt" sign on top of your monitor.)

Social Media

Newport says that social media is insidious in that it seems like you're doing productive things when really the gains are minor. To begin managing the way you use tech, Newport suggests taking the following steps to examine each of your tech tools in regard to their **benefits and cost.** This will help you see which tools are worth your time and which aren't.

1. **List your goals.** Make a list of your most important goals—professional and personal—and then list the two or three activities that help you progress most toward these goals. Newport notes that these activities should be specific enough to give you direction, but general enough to be repeatable. (Shortform note: Your goal-supporting activities *can* include social media. For example, Newport may claim that journalists and authors on social media are wasting their time, but these days, establishing a presence on social media is an essential part of marketing for authors trying to break into the industry.)
2. **Examine your tech tools:** For each of your major tools—for example, Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit—describe how they contribute (or don't contribute) meaningfully to your important goals. (Shortform note: To fully understand a tech tool's effect on you and your goals, you must be honest with yourself about *why* you're using the tool. Research shows that your intent in using social media determines how negatively or positively it will affect your well-being—those who use social media to check out what others are up to develop negative well-being due to constant comparison, while those who use social media to chat with their friends develop positive well-being due to strengthened social bonds.)

3. **Try quitting:** If you're on the fence about how much you need a tool, do an experiment: Quit for 30 days and see what happens. Afterward, consider whether your life would have been notably better if you had been able to use that tool. (Shortform note: Breaking out of the dopamine cycle of social media is easier said than done. There will be an adjustment period: Research shows that it takes about eight days for your brain to calm down and become accustomed to a lower level of stimulation.)

Emails

Newport contends that emails are an insidious time suck, both for senders and recipients. He says many people use emails unthinkingly or as a quick way to toss responsibilities into someone else's court. Newport suggests several ways to reduce the time you spend on the shallow work of unproductive emails.

1) Make sure your emails contain *all* essential information. Newport explains that when replying to an email, you should articulate: 1) the current state of things, 2) what the ultimate goal is, and 3) what the most effective next steps are. He says this prevents unproductive email volleys and closes the mental loop for you, preventing mental residue from accumulating.

- For example, a bad reply would be, "Yes, let's meet for lunch. When works for you?" A better reply is, "Here are times over the next week when I'm available. If any of these work for you, let me know, and please send a calendar invite. If none of these work, please send over a few times that do."

(Shortform note: Newport takes the idea of closing the "mental loop" from David Allen's *Getting Things Done* system. When you fail to clearly define and delegate the next steps (no matter how big or small a project), you keep too many thoughts and unanswered questions on your plate and can feel scattered or unfocused. On the other hand, sending out emails that ask recipients for clearly defined actions lets you mentally put the project aside until the action is performed.)

2) Publish your email policy, and respond—or don't—accordingly. Make sure people who are interested in contacting you know how you'll handle incoming emails, and which emails you'll reject. Newport suggests a clear message such as, "Please only contact me via email if you have a speaking engagement, collaboration, or introduction that you think I may be interested in. Please know that I may not reply unless it's a good fit for my schedule and interests."

(Shortform note: Newport's practices aren't "one size fits all." While they might work for *some* knowledge workers—professors, authors like Newport—most knowledge workers aren't in a position to tell others what they will and won't respond to. You can, however, simply slow down your response times, as suggested by Nir Eyal. He explains that humans have an innate need to imitate one another—if you reply quickly to a colleague, they'll reply quickly to you. Consciously slowing down this exchange means you'll receive fewer emails, and the emails you *do* get will be more thoughtful—by taking the pressure of a quick response off the other party, you allow them time to think through their response.)

Practice #3: Train Your Focus

As discussed, most beginners can only do about an hour of deep work at a time, but you can train your brain to focus for longer and longer stretches. Newport offers several techniques for this.

1) Let Boredom Happen

Newport points out that most people, in idle moments like waiting in line, reflexively pull out their phones for a quick scroll through social media or their texts. He says that by always filling in these low-stimuli

moments with a high-stimuli activity, you deplete your brain's ability to tolerate boredom—even if you set aside time for deep work, you won't be able to *do* the work during that time unless you strengthen your brain's "focus muscles." He suggests consciously letting yourself be bored in low-stimuli moments.

- For example, if you're waiting outside of a bar for your friend, consciously resist taking your phone out. Instead, just sit still and take in whatever's going on around you.

(Shortform note: Comedian Bo Burnham explores our toxic dependency on the Internet's endless dopamine supply and entertainment in his song, *Welcome to the Internet*. He describes the Internet as "a little bit of everything, all of the time'' that we've become addicted to by design, resulting in a world in which "boredom is a crime." Warning: Crude language.)

2) Define Metrics of Success

Newport suggests creating a clear metric by which you can define the success of your deep work practices. This practice helps keep you focused on *doing* your work rather than on what you should be doing with your time or wondering if your results are "enough."

- For example, you might set a goal to write 500 words every 30 minutes—this way, your task is straightforward and you naturally get two simple progress checks per hour.

(Shortform note: In *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, Dale Carnegie says that setting small goals or challenges makes work a bit like an enjoyable game and prevents you from becoming bored or zoning out. For example, if you're coming up on 30 minutes with only 400 words written, you'll likely find finishing those last 100 words an interesting challenge.)

Practice #4: Make the Most of Your Focused Time

Once you have the schedule and the environment, you must actually *do* deep work. Newport offers several suggestions to make the most of your focused time.

The 4 Disciplines of Execution

Newport outlines four principles of deep work that come from the book *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*. During deep work sessions, use these principles to optimize your time and focus on the right things.

1) Focus on what's important. When choosing what to work on, figure out what things have the largest impact. Then, instead of trying to say no to trivial distractions, **simply say yes to the most important task or goal.** This process helps crowd out shallow tasks that don't support your goals.

(Shortform note: In *Built to Last*, Jim Collins outlines steps to creating "big, hairy, audacious goals," or BHAGs—he urges you to create goals that are clear, push you outside your comfort zone, and are aligned closely with your core values.)

2) Use the right metrics. The most useful metrics in deep work are *leading* metrics, or metrics you can use in real-time to tweak what your result will be. For example, Newport suggests leading metrics like the number of pages you've written or the number of new ideas you've generated. These give real-time feedback that helps you see how effective you are at deep work. In contrast, a *lagging* metric would be how many papers you've published at the end of 2021—at that point, you can't go back and change your behavior in order to publish more papers in the year.

(Shortform note: The authors of *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* warn that leading metrics are more difficult to measure than lagging metrics (for example, it's easier to measure how much you weigh—a lagging metric—than it is to measure how many calories you're eating—a leading metric). You'll have to make a habit of collecting data on your leading metrics.)

3) Keep your metrics visible. Making your leading metrics visible will motivate you to keep up the habit and allow for more frequent celebration of successes. Newport suggests keeping a physical display in the workspace that shows your leading metric, like a small whiteboard where you mark off hours spent in deep work.

(Shortform note: Studies show that continuously celebrating small achievements and feeling a sense of progress is a fairly easy way to boost your overall happiness—this is important because the strongest indicator of productivity is the way you *feel.* Research reveals that when you feel positively toward your work, your productive performance naturally increases.)

4) Create accountability where possible. Periodically analyzing your deep work will keep you honest about how well you lived up to your goals. Newport explains that this exercise will show you where you can improve. He suggests setting up a weekly review to see what you've achieved in the past week and make a plan for the coming week. If you've had a negative week, make changes to your schedule to cut out factors that led to it.

(Shortform note: If you struggle with making behavioral changes based on a review of your own behaviors, you might try adding a more social aspect to your accountability practices. In *Indistractable,* Nir Eyal recommends social precommitments, which make it harder for you to perform undesirable behaviors. For example, you might make a precommitment to have someone else review each week's deep work report. You're more likely to stay away from shallow work and focus on hitting your goals because of the added pressure of being "watched" by someone else.)

Learn to Say No to Shallow Work

Newport warns that like most knowledge workers, you'll face invitations to partake in various forms of shallow work, such as meetings, committees, and travel. He suggests saying no to this shallow work by **providing a vague enough response that the requester cannot find a loophole that they could use to get you to say yes.** For example, you might say, "Sounds interesting, but I can't make it because of schedule conflicts," or, "Thank you for inviting me, but I won't be able to make it."

(Shortform note: Critics point out that in many industries, it's important for each team member to contribute to the group—it's unfair to expect others to take on shallow tasks while you refuse to do them. Newport's role as a professor isn't an exception to this expectation: Joining committees, networking, and doing other shallow tasks are becoming increasingly vital parts of finding employment in academia.)

Ritualize Your Workday Shutdown

To fully get your mind off work and relax, Newport suggests creating a shutdown ritual. He says this ritual should help you check your work for anything you forgot and plan your next day's work. For example, you could check your emails for any last urgent items, update your to-do list, check your calendar for upcoming deadlines, and say, "All done," or a similar phrase to explicitly mark the end of the workday.

(Shortform note: You may want to add reflective time into your workday shutdown—research shows that employees who spend 15 minutes at the end of their workday reflecting on what they learned during the day perform about 23% better in their work than those who don't take time for reflection.)

Newport stresses that an important benefit of the end-of-day ritual is that it helps reassure you that things will be fine when you shut down. When you create a shutdown ritual, instead of feeling anxious about unfinished tasks, you'll feel confident that all the important tasks are accounted for, and that you'll make meaningful progress the next day. This gives you more time to fully relax in your time off from work. (Shortform note: This ritual also sets clear boundaries between work and not-work, which is especially important as more knowledge workers fall into the trap of overworking when working from home.)

Shortform Introduction

"Deep work"—totally focused, undistracted work—is the way to thrive in today's information economy, explains professor Cal Newport in *Deep Work*. His method of blocking off chunks of time to focus intensely on a single task strengthens your ability to learn difficult things quickly and optimize your output—both of which are key skills for knowledge workers, or those who work with information. He explains why deep work is so valuable and then helps you design your life to allow more time for deep work.

About the Author

Cal Newport is a professor of computer science at Georgetown University. He's published eight books. His first three books focus on advice for students: *How to Win at College*, *How to Become a Straight-A Student*, and *How to Be a High School Superstar*. In 2007, in tandem with his work on these books, he started his popular blog, *Study Hacks*. The blog aims to help students do focused, meaningful schoolwork while managing the ever-growing presence of distracting technology.

Newport then pivoted toward writing about business and has published four books on the subject: *So Good They Can't Ignore You*, *Deep Work*, *Digital Minimalism*, and *A World Without Email*. He's also published *The Time-Block Planner*, a companion to his books that helps readers apply his principles and mindfully plan their days.

Newport regularly writes about deep work, digital use, and distraction for publications including *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*.

Connect with Cal Newport:

- Website
- Blog
- Podcast

Newport lives by his digital minimalism principles—he doesn't appear on any social media, save for a single tweet that reiterates his dedication to deep work:

The Book's Publication

Publisher: Grand Central Publishing, Hachette Book Group

Published in 2016, *Deep Work* is Newport's fifth book. It's since earned a spot as a *Wall Street Journal* Business Bestseller.

The Book's Context

Intellectual Context

Deep Work came out at a time when many other authors were writing on similar subjects—how to stand out, how to get focused, how to live in the present, how to get a handle on technology's place in our lives—and people were seeking out such books for answers.

In the book's publication year, 2016, New York Times bestseller lists (general and business) included books touching on related topics, such as *The Revenge of Analog, The Power of Habit, Originals,* and *Outliers.* Business Insider's bestsellers list included titles such as *Tools of Titans* and *Smarter Faster Better*.

The Book's Strengths and Weaknesses

Critical Reception

Reviews for *Deep Work* are fairly evenly split between positive and negative.

Positive reviewers, many of whom credit Newport's ideas with helping them work through procrastination or focus issues, agree that his ideas are invaluable to learning how to climb to the top in our current information economy. They note that the book feels like much more than a collection of tired productivity hacks—rather, it reads as a guide to overhauling foundational aspects of your life, such as your schedule, to create far-reaching changes.

On the other hand, negative reviewers commonly bring up several points of criticism. First, they note that Newport seems unaware of the unique privileges that allow him to do deep work, such as the flexibility of his academic job and a deep work activity that's relatively accessible—all you need is a laptop. Thus, while Newport may do a good job laying out the importance of deep work and describing ideal conditions for it, critics say he falls short of giving actionable advice for typical knowledge workers, who have less control over their work and schedules than a professor has.

Finally, many reviewers point out apparent sexism in Newport's examples—almost all of his examples of people excelling in deep work are men, and he seems to reserve female-centered examples for explanations of what *not* to do. (Note: Because we don't use Newport's examples, we don't directly address this criticism in this guide. However, it comes up frequently enough in reviews of the book that it bears mention.)

Commentary on the Book's Approach

Numerous reviewers compare Newport's writing to that of Malcolm Gladwell, author of popular psychology books like *Outliers* and *Blink*. Like Gladwell, he brings the concepts he discusses to life with interesting case studies and entertaining anecdotes. This accessible style helps readers connect with tricky ideas around the value of focus, and it illustrates the powerful effect that undistracted work can have on a career—especially in a world where many consider multitasking a superpower.

Commentary on the Book's Organization

In the first part of his book, Newport explains the philosophy of deep work and why it's an invaluable skill for knowledge workers. In the second part, he explains different "rules" that help readers optimize their days and carve out more time for deep work.

- Numerous critical reviews note that the three first chapters are interesting but become somewhat repetitive. They also note that in later chapters, Newport's "rules" tend to drag on or lack substance.

Our Approach in This Guide

In this guide, we've extended Newport's ideas to fill the gaps that reviewers' two main criticisms highlight—that the book's ideas don't apply to the majority of knowledge workers and that the ideas aren't actionable enough.

We draw heavily from *Indistractable* by Nir Eyal to address both of these critiques. We chose this book as a complement to Newport's work for several reasons.

1. Eyal's book, like *Deep Work*, centers on methods to become more focused in a distracted world.
2. While Newport focuses his argument on *shutting out* distractions and non-essentials, Eyal focuses his argument on *working alongside* distractions and non-essentials—a more useful approach to the majority of knowledge workers who can't ignore their email or physically step back from distracting environments.

Finally, we've condensed and reorganized the second part of the book to eliminate repetition and create a more logical flow through the process of setting up and engaging in deep work.

Introduction: What Is Deep Work?

Cal Newport defines "deep work" as focused, uninterrupted, *undistracted* work on a task that pushes your cognitive abilities to their limit.

In contrast, "shallow work" describes tasks that aren't cognitively demanding—like answering emails, filling out paperwork, and attending unproductive meetings. These tasks don't create much value and anyone can do them.

Newport asserts that groundbreaking ideas and meaningful progress come from deep work, not shallow work. Shallow work is incremental. Deep work can be transformational.

(Shortform note: Newport discusses an early iteration of deep work and its transformational effect in his book *So Good They Can't Ignore You*. He says that many people, when looking for work, make the mistake of looking for a job they love. While this may feel good in the short term, it won't pan out into a *career* you love in the long term. He says that what *really* sets you apart and guarantees success is developing scarce, prized skills—which he calls "career capital"—that let you choose among scarce, prized careers. In *Deep Work*, he expands on this idea by giving readers the tools to engage in the type of deliberate practice that develops your skills and career capital.)

"Deep Work" vs. Reflective Work

Some of Newport's contemporaries refer to deep work and shallow work as reflective work and reactive work. However, with some tasks, the boundary between "reflective" and "reactive" can be confusing.

- For example, you may think that because emails require you to *reflect* on an adequate response, they count as *reflective* work—though they're shallow work, by Newport's definition.

Newport's terms are a bit more intuitive—it's relatively easy to understand that "shallow" relates to work that can be processed in the task-switching forefront of your mind and "deep" relates to the most mentally demanding work.

The Rising Value of Deep Work

As our economy changes, deep work becomes more valuable. Over the past decades, the economy has moved away from brute force labor to analyzing and applying information.

(Shortform note: This idea isn't new—Peter Drucker's *The Effective Executive*, published in 1966, discusses the rising "knowledge economy." Drucker's best practices for standing out in the knowledge economy align closely with several practices we'll explore later in this guide, such as cutting out time-wasting activities, scheduling tasks into uninterrupted blocks of time, and focusing on one task at a time.)

The old economy—working in a manufacturing plant—didn't require deep work for most workers. Newport explains that skills that succeed in the modern economy—like complex problem solving, data analysis, and computer programming—require deep work to learn and execute. **He argues that your ability to do deep work will determine how much you thrive in the information economy.**

Ironically, the **same technologies that *built* the information economy are *depleting* our ability to do deep work**. Phones, emails, and addictive apps pull us away every few minutes. Thus, at a time when deep work is most important, it's also most difficult.

The ability to do deep work must be developed like a muscle. Building up your deep work muscle takes dedicated practice and focus because the constant distraction of technology is always working against you.

Is Deep Work *All* We Need?

Some may argue that Newport's argument is a bit of an oversimplification—myriad skills besides deep work will become increasingly important in the future as more tasks are delegated to machines and AI. In *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Yuval Noah Harari explores several skills that are crucial as we navigate the information economy, such as communication, collaboration, coping with change, critical thinking, and maintaining mental balance during uncertainty or instability.

However, the ability to do deep work inherently complements all these other skills, most especially managing change and instability—situations in which success looks like focusing only on what really matters to your goals and progress.

This guide is divided into two parts. First, we'll cover foundational ideas of deep work and learn about its benefits. Then, we'll explore practices that will help you create a supportive environment for engaging in deep work.

Exercise: What's Your Deep Work?

Think about what deep work means for you.

In your line of work, what are your most important deep work tasks? These are the tasks that most advance you toward your goals and can be transformational. List each task, and why each one is important.

How much time do you spend on deep work per week? Do you think this is enough? Why or why not?

If you do deep work regularly, what major life goals will you be closer to achieving?

Part 1: Why Deep Work Matters | Chapters 1-3: It's Important, Difficult, and Fulfilling

Newport outlines three foundational ideas to keep in mind as you learn to commit yourself to deep work:

- It's *important*, and therefore necessary.
- It's *difficult*, and therefore rare.
- It's *fulfilling*, and therefore worth your time.

Idea #1: Why Deep Work Is *Important*

Newport says that in our current information economy, those who have the ability to master technology and solve complex problems are the most valuable types of people. He argues that deep work allows you to do two things critical to your performance in this economy:

1. Learn and master new skills: Today's economy changes so quickly that a technology or best practice that was hot five years ago might be obsolete today. Newport notes that this is true of fields as wide-ranging as computer programming, marketing, academic research, and financial investments. He explains that, to stay relevant over decades, you must continue to learn challenging new skills—which requires focused concentration.

(Shortform note: Experts have pinpointed several actions that usually lead to skill mastery: First, determine if your goal is attainable and ensure that the skill is relevant to your career. Then, find a method that aligns with your learning style and allows you to take on the skill bit by bit, instead of all at once. Finally, rely on others—find a mentor who can coach you and help you reflect on your progress.)

2. Apply the skills to increase your output: Once you've learned a skill, you need to do something useful with it. Consider the simple rule: *High-quality work produced = Time Spent x Intensity of Focus.* And once again, the application of highly technical skills requires deep focus. (Shortform note: The key here is that what you do with your skill must be *useful*. In *The Effective Executive*, Peter Drucker explains how to determine if your work is *effective*—useful work that improves your performance and comes with application of Newport's rule—or just *efficient*—productivity for the sake of increasing output that's not necessarily useful or high-quality.)

If you want to stand out in your career, you must repeat these two practices over and over again.

(Shortform note: Many people falsely believe that they can only excel if they have innate talent. Newport's argument here—that practice is *crucial* to excellence—comes from the research of Anders Ericsson. In his book *Peak*, Ericsson explains that talent has little to do with it—research has repeatedly shown that people get to the top of their field through regular, focused practice. Ericsson calls this *deliberate practice*—as mentioned, Newport used this term in his *So Good They Can't Ignore You* before developing the idea further into the concept of "deep work.")

Furthermore, the changing economy also increases competition for your job, making it more critical to update your skills. Technology is making remote work more commonplace, putting the greatest talent around the world in reach of companies. If you're currently employed in an office, this means one of your competitive advantages—a warm body close to headquarters—will be diminished, and you will have to increase your skills to compensate and compete with remote talent. You'll need deep work time to do that.

Why Deep Work Is Especially Important for Remote Workers

As companies increasingly shift toward full-time remote work, your ability to do deep work won't only help you stand out in your field—it will also help you maintain a healthy work/life balance and avoid the burnout that's becoming more and more common among remote workers.

Early in the Covid-19 pandemic, many workers shifted to working remotely, and the results surprised many companies: Their employees, for the most part, maintained or increased their productivity. However, remote workers report that due to an inability to separate their work and home lives, working from home is more distracting than working in the office. **This means that though their productivity looks good on a superficial level, they're forced to work longer hours to offset the endless distractions of home life**.

How Distraction Hinders Learning and Productivity

Newport explains that without opportunities for deep work, your productivity and learning are hindered by distraction.

Distraction's Effect on Productivity

Newport explains that each time you switch between tasks, you retain some mental residue from the previous task. It takes time for you to adjust to the new task because of this residue—it might be minutes before you get into the groove of the new task. Even worse, he explains, is that if you're switching between tasks every few minutes, you might have zero time in which you're fully focused.

(Shortform note: In an interview, Newport stressed the importance of understanding that "task switching" isn't all that different from multitasking. He says that most people try to do one thing at a time because they know they shouldn't multitask—the problem, he says, is that most people don't realize that they shouldn't be frequently switching between "things" either.)

Distraction's Effect on Learning

Distraction might even change your brain on a molecular level—it interrupts myelination, or the process of modifying your neurons to make them more effective. This process is critical to training neural circuits and improving your skills. **Newport explains that in environments of deep focus without distractions, myelination seems to be more effective.**

(Shortform note: In *The Talent Code*, Daniel Coyle explains that people don't have a fixed amount of myelin—you can increase it with a combination of practice, passionate commitment, and mentorship.)

Idea #2: Deep Work Is *Difficult*

If deep work is so important, why don't we do it more often? Newport explains that it's extremely difficult to do because our world bombards us with near-constant distractions. **He outlines three major ways that modern workplaces derail knowledge workers' ability to engage in deep work.**

1) Open floor plans: Open floor plans were meant to increase collaboration and cross-pollination between teams. But Newport explains that they're a continuously distracting environment, where every conversation is heard, and one person can disrupt dozens of people.

- In this model, the distraction of the open floor plan is where people spend their time by default. Deep work and privacy are the *exception*.

(Shortform note: Previous to the Covid-19 pandemic, many companies were already starting to rethink their open floor plans, finding that putting so many employees in a shared space was creating too much distraction. For these companies, the pandemic highlighted the heightened risk of disease transmission in open shared spaces and accelerated their decision to leave open floor plans behind.)

He argues that the ideal office floor plan is the "hub and spoke" model, in which central hubs—such as meeting rooms, break areas, and cafeterias—allow for communal work and serendipitous meetings and branch off into spokes that lead to quiet, private places for people to do deep work.

- In this model, privacy and deep work become the default, and the distracting environment of the communal hub becomes the exception.

(Shortform note: We'll explore different ways that knowledge workers who *must* work in an open floor plan environment can avoid distraction in Chapter 5.)

2) Instant communication: Emails are distracting enough. But instant communication takes distraction to another level. With tools like Slack and texting, people can interrupt your work on-demand and expect help within seconds. According to Newport, as a result of this, we stop being deep thinkers and become human network routers.

Superficially, we prefer instant communication as the easy path. If you don't know something, you can just ask someone. You don't need to do the hard work of planning ahead, studying what you do or don't know, and scheduling meetings thoughtfully.

(Shortform note: We'll look at actionable steps to make instant messaging less distracting in Chapter 5.)

3) Social media: On social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, conversations continue endlessly, 24/7. You can get stuck in unending dialogue.

The effects are insidious. The new content you see always seems novel and productive, but it doesn't move you closer to the major things you really care about.

(Shortform note: The addictive quality of social media is due to our attraction to *variable rewards*: rewards that happen at random times, rather than in a predictable pattern—so they always feel like a surprise. In their book *Hooked*, Nir Eyal and Ryan Hoover explain that variable, surprising rewards trigger a much stronger dopamine response in your brain than rewards that happen on a fixed schedule. You can't predict which refresh of your newsfeed will reward you with interesting information or more likes, so the action never loses its appeal. We'll explore strategies for avoiding the distraction of social media in Chapter 5.)

Why Do Organizations Adopt Distracting Practices?

Newport points out that these distractions are ubiquitous in the corporate setting. This is confusing because, typically, if companies know something is drastically lowering productivity and profits, they move to stop it. But he reports that the reaction to distractions seems to be the opposite: Companies *support* distractions like open floor plans and real-time messaging. **How did so many companies systematically adopt these destructive distractions as the right thing to do?** Newport outlines three reasons:

1) Shallow Work Is Easier

If there was *solid* proof that deep work is value-driving and shallow work is not, then companies would

switch right away, but there isn't. Newport explains that this lack of proof means that people don't see any reason to do demanding deep work—in their minds, it has the same output value as easy shallow work. **As a result, people usually just gravitate toward behaviors that are easiest in the moment, instead of doing harder things.**

(Shortform note: It's hard to say whether we'd choose deep work over shallow work even if we *did* know its value. In *Switch*, Chip and Dan Heath explain that our brains are split into two systems: rational and emotional. The emotional side is *much* stronger than the rational side—even if we rationally know deep work is a more valuable use of our time, our brains will push us toward shallow work activities that promise instant gratification. However, if we teach our brains to do difficult actions on *autopilot*, we can override this tendency. This is why, in Part 2, Newport stresses the importance of scheduling deep work and making it a part of your routine.)

2) A New Economy Calls for New Proxies of Progress

The information economy brings a management challenge: how to measure output from individual workers. Newport explains that for factory jobs in an industrial economy, output is clear and quantitative—you produce so many widgets in an hour, and you can be compared on equal footing with other workers. On the other hand, in information jobs, complex problems often require a larger team of people with different roles. It's no longer clear who contributes what. People's jobs become more diffuse and vague—for example, a "marketing manager" could be doing lots of different things with different projects.

To deal with this, Newport says that managers have developed **superficial proxies, or indicators, of progress** such as email response times or number of meetings conducted. The thinking is that as long as there's a lot of motion, surely people are being productive. In contrast, deep work looks like slacking. Stepping away from email to think deep thoughts seems indulgent when everyone else is buzzing around the office.

(Shortform note: Another factor encouraging people to choose shallow work is recency and availability bias, which causes you to attribute more importance to information that you most recently encountered and is therefore most readily available in your mind. The combination of this psychological phenomenon and the fact that email is *always* a click away (therefore always recent and available) contributes to managers overestimating the importance of your inbox.)

3) Keeping Up With the Joneses

Newport explains that there's also a technological imperative or belief that "any technology is likely good technology." There's pressure to look—to the press, potential employees, and customers—like you're on the vanguard of technology. This makes you adopt open floor plans and new tools like Slack and social media without fully considering their impact.

(Shortform note: This tech-adoption tendency affects workers' ability to engage in deep work both inside and outside the office. As organizations increasingly normalize remote work—and in many cases, advertise it as a *perk* of working for them—we're already seeing a clear way that new tech is harming productivity: During the Covid-19 pandemic, many organizations started to rely heavily on Zoom meetings as a means of staying connected. This tanked employee productivity—what was once a quick email or phone call was now an entire meeting via Zoom. Over the course of the pandemic, researchers found that employees attended 13% more meetings than before, and each meeting had 14% more attendees than normal.)

Idea #3: Deep Work Is Fulfilling

Shallow work is deceptively bad because it *feels* productive and meaningful. Answering emails feels like you're doing something. Staying on top of the office conversation in Slack makes you feel updated on what's going on.

In contrast, Newport admits that deep work can often feel directionless, for several reasons. First, complex problems require thinking time that can lead to multiple dead ends. Second, you produce fewer concrete results, and the results come unpredictably. Answering emails feels like a better place to spend your time. **To combat this perception, realize that deep work moves you more meaningfully toward happiness and fulfillment.** As previously explained, deep work is when you're most capable of tackling your thorniest problems. Because these problems often yield the largest rewards, deep work is often far more rewarding than shallow work.

Beyond this, Newport offers three other ways deep work leads to fulfillment.

(Shortform note: Newport mentions in an interview that he didn't originally intend to include a chapter on the fulfilling aspect of deep work. However, as his research went on, he found so many accounts of people whose deep work practices led to a deeper sense of happiness and fulfillment in their work, he felt that he needed to include it.)

1) Deep Work Creates a State of "Flow"

Most people report feeling most fulfilled when doing deep work. Newport explains that the idea of deep work aligns closely with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's ideas on "flow." Csikszentmihalyi, psychologist and author of *Flow*, found that when people concentrate on a worthwhile task and are pushed to their cognitive limit (that is, the task is neither too hard nor too easy), they experience a state of flow—a sense of contentment and purpose.

Surprisingly, Newport notes, leisure time doesn't bring the same level of satisfaction. Free time is too unstructured and requires effort to be shaped into something as satisfying as stretching to your mental limits.

(Shortform note: Because flow occurs when you're working hard at something you believe is important, it naturally would be more likely to happen when you're doing deep work in support of your goals than when you're scrolling through Reddit comments.)

Newport says that achieving a flow state hits on universal behavior drivers—seeking mastery, autonomy, and purpose.

(Shortform note: In *Drive*, Daniel Pink explains that you usually can't bribe yourself into doing creative work with external motivators like money—this is why the flow state and the *intrinsic motivators* (or behavior drivers) it creates are so vital to deep work.)

2) Deep Work Has a Protective Psychological Effect

Deep work insulates your mind from many distracting, often negative irritants.

- You tend to attribute happiness to your circumstances (what happens to you), but studies suggest **your happiness is really dependent on *what you pay attention to***. Given the same situation, focus on positive things, and you will be happy; focus on negative things, and you will be sad.
- When you lose focus, you tend to fixate on what's wrong with your life, rather than what's right. Problems come to mind more readily than positives, and without something productive to concentrate on, you dwell on the little problems.

- Checking email is psychologically harmful because it often represents unresolved tasks and complaining people.

(Shortform note: Newport doesn't comment on the many ways that superficial work—such as responding to emails from happy customers—can not only make you feel good but also keeps you engaged with your work. Anders Ericsson touches on this idea in *Peak*—he argues that receiving positive feedback during deliberate practice (deep work) is crucial. Without it, the inherently difficult and tedious process of deep work can become boring and unmotivating.)

3) Deep Work Creates a Sense of Meaning

Newport's last argument for deep work is his most abstract. He explains that deep work brings *meaning* to your tasks.

In the past, "meaning" was easier to achieve due to widespread belief that everything someone did in their life was in service to a higher power. Then, with the rise of secularism and the Enlightenment, "meaning" became something that individuals must actively seek out, rather than look to their faith to provide.

This could easily lead many to nihilism, but craftsmen, in particular, have found a source of meaning in the materials they transform—for instance, one might find meaning in discovering the beautifully carved table that was "hidden" in a piece of wood. The craftsman does things that are *superficially menial*—sculpting marble or weaving blankets—but it takes a great deal of skill to discover beauty within preexisting objects.

Knowledge workers face a more difficult challenge in finding meaning because their tasks are not as defined or tangibly successful as those of craftsmen—they can struggle to find satisfaction. **But Newport argues that there's elegance in any work if you have the right mindset and look for the meaning in superficially menial tasks**—a block of computer code can be beautiful, as can a marketing slogan, business plan, or new technology.

(Shortform note: Employers should focus on cultivating pride of workmanship instead of focusing on numbers and costs. In *Out of the Crisis*, W. Edwards Deming explains that postwar Japanese companies emphasized quality for its own sake, which allowed their employees to focus on doing their best and feel pride in their work. Employees with this mindset are more satisfied and productive, which saves the companies both time and money.)

Deep Work Is More than Work

Newport has noted that the concept of deep work—and its importance in our increasingly distracted world—doesn't only apply to what we traditionally think of as *work*. He says you might apply the idea of focusing without distraction to developing skills in a new hobby, spending time with your family, or hitting personal goals such as reading more books.

Part 2: Deep Work Practices | Chapter 4: Plan Out Time for Deep Work

After establishing what deep work is and why it's important in Part 1, Newport moves on to explain different ways to make deep work practices part of your life. The first step he outlines is carving out time that you'll dedicate to deep work. He warns that it's very difficult to simply *will* yourself to do deep work on demand. It's much more effective to approach deep work with structure, habit, and discipline—in other words, to make deep work a *practiced ritual*.

Ritualizing deep work is important because, without a ritual's structure, distractions quickly get in the way. According to Newport, distractions are anything that you'd rather be doing than deep work—such as scrolling social media, taking a nap, or hanging out with friends. You use willpower to overcome these distractions and get back on task. Newport argues that you have a finite amount of willpower each day. If you have to continuously force yourself to switch from distractions back to deep work, you'll deplete your willpower and more easily give in to distraction. This limits you from reaching the maximum of your deep work potential.

The Debate Around "Willpower Depletion"

Recent research has called the idea of willpower depletion into question—scientists can't replicate the results of the experiment that created the concept.

This revelation isn't all bad—the belief that willpower is a finite resource that you either have or don't can lead to defeatist practices. Anders Ericsson, author of *Peak*, says that the "lack of willpower" mindset creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: You think you don't have the willpower to improve a skill, so you don't practice because there's no use in trying, so you never improve. In *Indistractable*, Nir Eyal says that when you think of willpower as finite, you use this knowledge as an excuse to give up on overwhelming or cognitively demanding tasks in favor of low-effort activities like watching Netflix.

These authors suggest a few different ways to overcome these thought processes.

- Ericsson suggests clearing your schedule of *everything* other than the thing you need to do, because having difficult tasks scheduled at a specific time makes you less likely to give in to the temptation of choosing another activity.
- Eyal suggests treating your willpower as an emotion that you need to manage, like anger or sadness. When you feel a lack of willpower, think of ways you might manage it in that moment—for example, turning your attention to a relatively small or easy part of the task so you can check something off the list and get a boost of motivation.

The Four Types of Deep Work Scheduling

If you make deep work a ritual or habit that your autopilot defaults to, you no longer have to employ your willpower to overcome distraction. Newport explains that not having to spend time deciding (or wrestling) between distraction and deep work increases the amount of time you can spend in deep work and reduces your rate of failure.

He says that **the most effective way to make deep work a *habit* is to set time aside specifically for focusing on deep work**. To be successful at doing deep work in the long term, you'll have to try out different schedules to see what best fits your lifestyle and needs. Newport offers four types of deep work schedules for consideration, each with different time requirements and efficacy.

Schedule Type 1: Seclusion

Structure: Remove as many shallow work tasks from your life as possible; delegate as many as possible to assistants. Spend nearly all your time on deep work. Like a monk, you spend your time somewhat isolated and in deep focus on your work.

- Examples: Some authors go off the grid and aren't reachable by email or through social media. All correspondence comes in by postal mail or through their editor.

Pros: You get extended periods of deep work—it becomes your default working style, not something you have to plan for.

Cons: This isn't feasible for most people, given the requirements of their career.

(Shortform note: This schedule requires you to avoid all shallow tasks, though often these tasks are a necessary part of life. To handle this, you'll have to learn the essential skill of *delegation*. In *Who Not How*, Dan Sullivan explains that successful delegation depends on finding the best person for the job, instead of finding the best way to do the job. Instead of asking, "*How* can I get my shallow work done with this kind of schedule?" ask, "*Who* can I delegate my shallow work to?")

Schedule Type 2: Periodic

Structure: Carve out regular periods each week, month, or entire parts of the year to focus on deep work. The book stresses that the period should be **at least one full day** to reach the maximum intensity of deep work. (As we'll see in the following schedule suggestion, it's possible to do a few daily hours of deep work, but those few hours won't be at the intensity you would achieve in a full day of deep work.)

- Examples: You might carve out a three-day block of the week where you aren't contactable while preserving the other two days for shallower work.

Pros: This is more realistic than the seclusion schedule. Setting aside at least one full day of deep work helps you reach your maximum level of focus.

Cons: Despite being more realistic, it's still impractical for many workers, who have to perform certain tasks daily.

(Shortform note: Even if you're a 9-5 office worker, it may be possible to adopt a periodic schedule—especially as companies normalize remote work. In *The Effective Executive*, Peter Drucker recommends working from home at least one day per week, and planning to do your most mentally demanding tasks in this isolated, focused time.)

Seclusion and Periodic Schedules *Won't* Work for Most

These first two schedules get the most backlash from reviewers, who accuse Newport of not recognizing his privilege and presenting ideas that are impossible for most working schedules. However, Newport noted in the book that these schedules usually make people angry or defensive, and he acknowledged they aren't possible for *most* knowledge workers. He then added the following

two schedules, which fit a wider range of lifestyles.

Schedule Type 3: Daily

Structure: Set aside a regular block of time each day to focus on deep work.

- Example: Set aside the morning (such as 8 to 11 a.m.) for deep work, before jumping into shallow work.

Pros: The regularity of this schedule is conducive to forming a habit, and it's realistic for many careers and lifestyles.

Cons: This schedule doesn't give the full day of deep work that the seclusion or periodic schedules can provide, and therefore you won't reach your *maximum* focus potential.

(Shortform note: In *The 5 AM Club*, Robin Sharma notes that the most productive part of your day is the hour right after you wake up because you're recharged and the world is relatively quiet and distraction-free. It therefore makes sense to try to schedule your deep work time block in the early morning.)

Schedule Type 4: Ad Hoc

Structure: Find some time to do deep work whenever you can get it.

- Example: When on a trip with your family, carve out a few hours to do work before joining them for activities.

Pros: This is the most flexible schedule. You can do deep work at any point when it's possible.

Cons: Because it's irregular, it's the least successful in setting up a habit. It requires the ability to switch on deep work instantaneously. Because it's more variable, you're more likely to run into distractions and thus more likely to consume willpower.

(Shortform note: It's difficult to successfully achieve a level of deep work on the ad hoc schedule unless you've trained your ability to switch your "deep work brain" on and off at will—like a journalist, for example—or if you're strongly driven by the belief that your work matters and that you'll succeed. In his book *So Good They Can't Ignore You*, Newport elaborates on *why* having a strong sense of purpose is essential to doing your best work at an exceptional performance level.)

How Much Deep Work Should You Try to Fit Into Your Day?

Newport cautions that there *is* a limit to how much deep work you'll be able to accomplish per day. Anders Ericsson, author of *Peak*, explains that most novices can only accomplish about an hour a day of intense concentration. **Experts who have extensive practice can expand to up to four hours, but rarely are able to exceed this**. We'll explore techniques for training your ability to concentrate and engage in deep work for increasingly long periods in Chapter 6.

(Shortform note: Newport doesn't discuss circumstances under which people can—and do—concentrate deeply for more than four hours at a time, such as chess grandmasters. Critics point out that this gives Newport a sort of loophole: If someone claims that they're able to do deep work for more than four hours, he can always respond that their work must have *actually* been shallow work.)

Plan Out Your Days

Newport suggests several techniques for making sure you leave yourself enough time for deep work and aren't tempted to engage in shallow work during that time.

Technique #1: Schedule Internet Time

Schedule in advance when you'll use the Internet. Avoid it completely outside these times. Newport gives some tips on how to make the most of this practice:

- Keep a notepad nearby where you record the next time you're scheduled to use the Internet, and any ideas you need to revisit once you're online again.
- Plan your work so you don't need the Internet to make progress. If you get stuck by not being able to access the Internet, then move on to another task. Plan better next time.
- If you do this primarily at work, then don't stop this practice at home after work. This will undo the training you did at work.

(Shortform note: For most knowledge workers, it's not possible to only use the Internet at certain times of the day. But if you must use the Internet all day, try using website-blocking apps like Forest or Self Control to help remove the temptation to switch your attention away from deep work.)

Technique #2: Plan Out Every Minute of Your Day, and Quantify Depth

Next, **plan out everything that you need to do throughout the day.** Newport says that when you set specific goals by planning out what you'll work on in advance, you're less likely to switch to other tasks.

(Shortform note: In *Switch*, Chip and Dan Heath explore why advance planning helps keep us on task. They explain that humans are predisposed to decision paralysis—when you have too many options of what you *could* work on, you're likely to default to whatever feels easiest. On the other hand, having a clear plan of what needs to get done removes your options and the need to make a decision.)

Newport outlines three steps to planning your time in a deep work-supporting way:

Step 1: Plan Your Tasks

Think about the tasks that you need to complete during the day and note what time you plan to complete these tasks. Newport recommends breaking down your tasks into half-hour blocks, making sure to schedule some overrun blocks for tasks you suspect might run over their allotted time, and buffer blocks to handle emergencies that arise.

(Shortform note: In 2020, Newport released *The Time-Block Planner*, which helps guide readers to create schedules broken down into half-hour increments and in alignment with their goals.)

Step 2: Quantify Depth

He then says to estimate and note the "deep work" complexity of each task. As a rule of thumb, **imagine how long it would take to train a smart college grad to do the task—the more time, the deeper the work.**

- Example: Executing an operational task like an analytics report may just take a week for the grad to learn. In contrast, it may take a grad months or years to reach your level of ability in researching the industry to find a new customer need.

(Shortform note: This heuristic doesn't always work if you've built up a skill to the point that it's routine. For

instance, a surgeon operating may not consider a certain procedure deep work.)

Once you've finished quantifying the depth of your day's tasks, look over your schedule. If your day is full of shallow tasks, Newport urges you to consider how you can replace those with deeper work.

- How much of your schedule should be shallow work? Newport suggests a guideline of 30-50% to start. Certainly, it shouldn't be the majority of your time, but in most careers, you can't get away with lower. Remember that for deep work beginners, it's not unusual for an eight-hour workday to have only one hour of actual deep work.

What Tasks Should Be on Your Schedule?

In *Digital Minimalism*, Newport discusses the importance of building a schedule based on your values—decide what activities are truly aligned with your values and schedule time for them first. Then, schedule distractions (or in this context, shallow work) around it.

Recall Newport's note that the concept of deep work doesn't only apply to what we traditionally think of as work. **Deep work is happening whenever you're living aligned with and focused on your values.** Because everyone's values are different, the tasks on their schedule will be different.

- For example, a stay-at-home mom might build her schedule around spending more time with her kids and getting a new degree online. A different mother may build her schedule around advancing in her career and attending all of her daughter's basketball games. Deep work in any of these areas requires presence and focus.

Step 3: Regularly Reflect on and Tweak Your Schedule

Newport says that if time runs out on a task but you have momentum and inspiration, you should keep going. This addresses the complaint that too much structure decreases serendipitous good ideas—if you're deep in your work, keep going until those ideas happen. And in reality, structuring time to get into deep work should *increase* the number of good ideas.

He suggests reviewing the accuracy of your time blocks at the end of each day. This will help you set more accurate goals and expectations in the future.

(Shortform note: Like many people, you may feel discouraged if you set up a schedule and then aren't able to follow it, or if you derail your plans by giving in to distraction. Nir Eyal addresses this feeling in *Indistractable*, and he explains that it's essential to think of your schedule as an evolving experiment—you probably won't get it right on the first try, and that's okay. Beating yourself up for not being perfect will likely only stress you out and distract you further. Instead, think about ways that you can build a schedule better aligned to your needs and keep experimenting.)

Technique #3: Set Ambitious Deadlines

Newport recommends giving yourself intense deadlines—this will force you to concentrate at the limit of your ability to make the deadline. There's no way you can give in to distraction and still make your deadline.

To do this, estimate how long you'd normally schedule for the task. **Then cut down the time drastically**, and set it as your deadline.

(Shortform note: Intense deadlines not only force you into focus mode but can actually make your work *better*. When you set an ambitious deadline, you create a moderate amount of emotional arousal—which, according to the Yerkes-Dodson Law, is where you achieve peak performance. In other words, people really do "work best under pressure.")

Technique #4: Set a Budget With Your Boss for Shallow Work

Newport says that a common barrier to performing more deep work is the fear that your employer has expectations requiring shallow work—for example, expecting you to respond to emails immediately. Have a conversation with your boss about your schedule. He outlines several questions that should come up in this conversation:

- Start with the high-level goal: The deep work components of your time generate the most value for the company. **Does your boss agree?** It's important that deep work not be seen as an indulgent luxury, but rather as *the best* place to spend time.
- **Does it make sense to restructure your time to focus on deep work?**
- **What are the expectations around shallow work—such as group chats, emails, and meetings—and can you restructure your time to minimize those while still servicing the rest of the team?**

Once people know that you'll be spending more of your time in deep work, they'll adjust their expectations.

(Shortform note: You may be nervous about starting this conversation with your boss due to a false belief that she *demands* that you be on call all day. Nir Eyal points out that your boss doesn't want you checking your email all day—she wants you to do your work. If doing your work requires cutting some shallow tasks out of your schedule, chances are high that your boss will readily agree.)

Exercise: Determine Your Deep Work Schedule

Deep work doesn't just *happen*—you need to make time for it in your schedule.

Think about your goals. To achieve them, how much of your day should be dedicated to deep work tasks? (For example, you may only be spending one hour per day in deep work, but *should* be spending at least two hours.)

Which of Newport's four proposed schedules—seclusion, periodic, daily, or ad hoc—do you think is both feasible *and* aligned with your goals? (For example, if you work a 9-5 job in an office, you likely won't be able to adopt a seclusion schedule.)

What steps can you take to lessen the time you spend on shallow tasks and make your dedicated deep work time more effective? (For example, if you're a writer, you might tighten your deadlines by 15% and turn off your Internet every night from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. If you're an office worker, you might have a conversation with your boss about your shallow work budget and commit to working without Internet for two hours each day after lunch.)

Chapter 5: Build Your Deep Work Environment

In addition to scheduling time for deep work, Newport encourages you to build an environment that supports deep work by reducing distraction triggers.

(Shortform note: This chapter focuses on *external triggers* that might prevent you from focusing on your work. We'll explore *internal triggers* that drive you to distraction in Chapter 6.)

Step 1: Create a Deep-Work-Only Environment

There are several ways that you can create an environment that lends itself to undistracted focus:

Designate a Deep Work Space

Newport says you should choose a place that you go to *only* for deep work (like a conference room, the library, or an office in your home)—you won't do *any* shallow work in this place. Save it for another place dedicated only to shallow work. Compartmentalizing your location this way will cement the habit of deep work more strongly.

Once you have a location for your deep work, Newport urges you to add support in ways that allow for more focused deep work—like starting with coffee, having enough food, and integrating light exercise into your routine.

(Shortform note: In *Atomic Habits*, James Clear discusses the power of using environmental cues to trigger desirable behaviors. Having a designated workspace is one type of environmental cue, but you can set up more—for example, lighting a specific candle or starting a certain playlist each time you start working. Over time, your brain will associate these cues with deep work and you'll more easily ease into focus.)

Invest (Literally) in Your Deep Work

Newport discusses the possibility of making a "grand gesture"—that is, committing an investment, such as renting a hotel room or retreating to an isolated cabin, to jumpstart your activity. He reasons that if your deep work space costs you money or is difficult to get to, you'll feel more compelled to use it.

(Shortform note: Several critics labeled Newport's examples of "grand gestures" as out of touch and useless to the majority of knowledge workers. In *Indistractable*, Nir Eyal explores an idea similar to Newport's grand gestures but approaches it from a more accessible angle. He suggests creating "pacts" that attach a monetary value to a task you want to complete—if you perform the task, you get to keep the money, but if you don't complete the task, you lose the money. For example, you might give a trusted friend $100, telling her that she's only allowed to give the money back if you make a certain deadline.)

Try Collaborating

While most deep work is done alone, Newport suggests that it can be helpful to work alongside someone who's doing the same type of deep work as you are—their presence can create a sort of competition or productive pressure that makes it easier to stick with your work.

(Shortform note: This is a tactic used by people with ADHD and referred to as "body doubling." Many people with ADHD report becoming more focused and productive when another person is sitting in the same room, even if that person isn't doing the same type of work and isn't interacting with or pressuring them. Why this works is unclear, but some researchers think it may be due to the mirror neuron system, which

developed early in our evolution when humans depended on being part of a group for survival. This system directs the brain to mirror others' actions—when someone with ADHD observes another person being calm and focused, their brain copies the behavior.)

Step 2: Get Rid of Distractions

Newport points out that a key to spending more time in deep work is to avoid distractions that take you out of deep work.

(Shortform note: You may think that it's not necessary to *cut out* potential distractions, instead opting for simple management techniques like placing your phone face down to avoid looking at notifications. However, studies show that when working on the computer, people become distracted, on average, every 40 seconds. Even if your phone is sitting face down on your desk, it's still an available distraction to reach for.)

In Chapter 1, Newport outlined three major distractors that are pervasive in current office culture: open floor plans, social media, and instant messaging. In this section, we'll explore not only solutions to these three problems but also to a fourth major distractor that Newport visits later in the book—email.

Floorplans

In Chapter 1, Newport discussed the ideal office layout for deep work: the "hub and spoke" model, in which there are both communal spaces for serendipitous encounters or collaboration and private, isolated spaces for uninterrupted focus.

(Shortform note: While Newport suggests this model as a solution to the current trend of open floor plans, he doesn't give any type of workaround for those who have no control over the layout of their workspace. In *Indistractable*, Nir Eyal suggests that workers who find themselves in a less-than-ideal, distracting workspace try creating visual cues to show others that they need to be left alone. This may look like a certain hat you wear when you're in deep work mode, a small "Do not interrupt" sign on top of your monitor, or a pair of noise-canceling headphones that have the added effect of blocking out distracting conversations.)

Social Media

Newport points out that for many people, one of their greatest distractions is social media. Social media, and much of the Internet in general, is *designed* to get you addicted to its content, and it can easily derail you from meeting your true goals.

(Shortform note: In *Hooked*, Nir Eyal and Ryan Hoover explore the different methods that media companies use to get—and keep—your attention. The authors explain that not only is this information helpful in understanding and breaking your tech addictions, but it can also help you make *good habits* (like deep work) more "addictive." For example, you may create a trigger: Each day, your phone's alarm goes off at 3 p.m. (the beginning of your afternoon slump) and prompts you to put on your sneakers and go for a walk. Over time, this trigger will program your brain to crave the feeling of exercise each afternoon.)

Like shallow work, social media is insidious in that it seems like you're doing productive things when really the gains are minor. For example, people believe that Facebook connects them to others or surfaces relevant news. This sounds good in principle, but Newport claims that the real result is superficial—the acquaintances you're making are shallow and unlikely to be the center of your social life. You'll arrange to see the people you *really* care about outside of Facebook. Similarly, the news you come across on your feed may be fun to read, but for the most part, it doesn't move you closer to your major life goals.

Newport says that to counteract the distracting effects of social media, some people declare Internet sabbaticals and go completely offline for a month. He doesn't agree with this method—he says it's not necessary to be a Luddite, just like artisans don't forgo all tools made of metal. Social media *can* be useful if you use it deliberately. Unfortunately, as Newport explains, many people use the "any benefit" argument—that is, a **technology tool is justified if it provides *any* benefit to the user.** He argues that this thinking dilutes your focus. Instead, you should concentrate your time only on the most effective tools, instead of spreading it across many somewhat effective tools, in order to become more productive.

(Shortform note: Reviewers have pointed out that Newport has never utilized social media and therefore may not be the best authority to comment on what different platforms can and can't do for its users. Consequently, his view that Facebook usually only creates shallow relationships feels outdated: It's not uncommon these days to live and work in cities or countries far from your friends and family. Social media, notably Facebook—as many expat communities report—is a simple way to both establish relationships in your new city and stay in touch with loved ones you're not able to meet up with in person.)

To begin managing the way you use tech, Newport suggests taking the following steps to examine each of your tech tools in regard to their **benefits, cost, and the opportunity cost**. This will help you clearly see which tools are worth your time and which aren't.

1) List Your Goals and Goal-Supporting Activities

First, make a list of your most important goals—professional and personal—and then list the two or three activities that help you progress most toward these goals. Newport notes that these activities should be specific enough to give you direction, but general enough to be repeatable.

- For example, "Do good research" is too vague of a goal to be actionable. "Finish paper A" is a one-time goal that doesn't suggest a repeatable practice to keep moving you forward. Instead, try to name a specific, ongoing activity such as, "Regularly read the cutting-edge papers in the field."

(Shortform note: While Newport's arguments are generally against social media, your goal-supporting activities don't *have* to be. For example, reviewers are critical of Newport's claim that journalists and authors on social media are wasting their time—after all, he says, there are many successful authors without social media accounts. This argument misses the important detail that the authors he names found their success *before* social media became such a pervasive advertising tool. These days, for many authors trying to break into the industry, establishing a presence on social media is an essential part of marketing their work.)

2) Examine Your Tech Tools

For each of your major tools—for example, Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit—**describe how they contribute (or don't contribute) meaningfully to your important goals.**

- For example, if your professional goal is to develop innovative products that solve people's problems, then spending time on Reddit or marketing yourself on Twitter may be less effective than focusing on the problem area and talking to experts in the field.

(Shortform note: To fully understand a tech tool's effect on you and your goals, you must be honest with yourself about *why* you're using the tool. Research shows that your intent in using social media determines how negatively or positively it will affect your well-being—those who use social media to check out what others are up to develop negative well-being due to constant comparison, while those who use social media to chat with their friends develop positive well-being due to strengthened social bonds.)

If you're on the fence about how much you need a tool, do an experiment: Quit for 30 days and see

what happens. Afterward, consider whether your life would have been notably better if you had been able to use that tool.

- Newport argues that what holds people back from quitting is the conceit that people care what you have to say. In reality, much of social media for most people is a mutual exchange: "Like my stuff and I'll like yours, too." It's not a genuine interaction, and it can be easily replaced by other people. If you quit social media, you may find that you weren't missed at all. If anyone cares, they'll get in touch with you another way. (Shortform note: This doesn't take into account that most people aren't closely tracking their followers—your absence may go unnoticed, even by people who care about you. Newport's argument that people who don't reach out don't *really* care about you can make you feel isolated or forgotten, when the real reason for their lack of contact may simply be that they *don't realize* you're not seeing their posts.)
- He says if you quit reading news or participating in online flame wars, you may find yourself feeling more content, and will likely find you're not at all upset about hearing big announcements a few hours after everyone on social media. (Shortform note: This feeling of contentment is due to *physically* being less stressed: Studies have shown that receiving constant updates about events (on a global and personal scale) raises your cortisol—stress hormone—levels. When you step away from social media, your cortisol levels return to normal.)

(Shortform note: Breaking out of the dopamine cycle of social media is easier said than done. There will be an adjustment period: Research shows that it takes about eight days for your brain to calm down and become accustomed to a lower level of stimulation. According to psychologist Jonathan Bricker, the most successful way to respond to your inevitable social media craving during this time is not to ignore your craving—this only makes it stronger. Instead, acknowledge your craving and accept its presence. Often, taking the time to go through this thought exercise is enough for the craving to subside.)

3) Find a New Way to Spend Your Time

Tally up the time you spend on each tool that doesn't support your goal, then think of alternative, goal-supporting activities you could fill this time with. Newport explains that these more meaningful activities are the true opportunity cost of distracting tech tools—the more time you spend on relatively meaningless distractions, the less time you have to work on activities that move you toward what you *really* want. He suggests finding structured hobbies with defined goals, such as reading a certain number of books or knitting a scarf. He notes two benefits of these types of activities:

1. If you accomplish a goal in your free time, you'll feel more fulfilled than if you spent hours meandering aimlessly on the Internet. You'll also begin the next day more relaxed and ready to do deep work.
2. Goal-supporting activities give your brain a break. You might think that your brain *needs* "vegging" activities like scrolling Instagram or bingeing Netflix in order to recover from cognitively demanding tasks—but Newport argues that all your brain really wants is change, not rest.

(Shortform note: In *Digital Minimalism*, Newport explores ways you can "reclaim" your time and attention and refocus on what's important to you, such as your family, your relationships, and your leisure time. For the most part, he suggests "analog" activities that take you away from your screens, but keep in mind that there are plenty of online activities—such as taking classes, learning new skills, or beating video games—that can help advance you toward different goals.)

4) Keep or Discard the Tool

Newport recommends adopting a tool only if you're sure the benefits substantially outweigh the

negative impact and the opportunity cost. Carefully consider whether it would be better to shift the time spent on each tool to alternative activities.

Most likely, you'll find that a few significant activities drive most of the progress toward your most important goals. Newport claims that once you discover this, you'll be able to discard the numerous tasks that aren't actually productive.

(Shortform note: In *Digital Minimalism,* Newport adds another step to this process of focusing your concentration—**thinking in features.** Think of each tool you keep in terms of *the individual features useful to you,* rather than as a single tool. For example, you might think of Facebook in terms of its Messenger application, event announcements, and several groups you joined to learn guitar. This exercise helps train you to use each tech tool only in its most useful ways, instead of lumping the good and bad uses together.)

Instant Messaging

In Chapter 1, Newport contends instant messaging systems that keep us in constant contact with colleagues mean we never have undistracted moments in which to do deep work. (Shortform note: Newport doesn't offer a specific antidote as he does for other distractions such as social media—however, his other techniques such as using tools only in ways that support your goals, could apply as well to instant messaging.)

Tips on Resisting the Distraction of Slack...From Slack Employees

Many people blame the instant messaging platform Slack for the havoc instant communication is wreaking on employee focus. However, on his blog, Nir Eyal points out that Slack employees actually have an exceptionally healthy relationship with the product. He chalks this up to several practices:

- **They schedule time for instant messaging:** Instead of letting messages ping all day, Slack employees block off time in their schedules for writing and responding to messages. When they need to do uninterrupted work, they set an "away" message that notes when they'll be available to chat.
- **They use the Do Not Disturb feature:** Most Slack employees set their Do Not Disturb feature, which blocks notifications from getting through to them, to turn on automatically after work hours and on the weekends. (Eyal notes that this practice is almost unnecessary: Slack employees have a shared understanding that it's rude to send messages outside of work hours.)
- **Leaders set a strong example:** The foundation of Slack employees' healthy relationship with instant messaging is the example set by their leaders, who take their role as culture influencers seriously. For example, they regularly remind employees that they're expected to be out of the office by a certain time every night and should *not* be working from home in the evening or on the weekend. Leaders are careful not to message anyone outside of office hours, knowing that their employees take cues from them.

Instant messaging itself isn't the problem—it's the way employees are (or aren't) trained to use it effectively. As an employee, you can create policies around your instant messaging use. As a manager, you can adopt best practices and demonstrate them to your employees.

Emails

Newport claims that emails are an insidious time suck, both for senders and recipients. (Shortform note: Judging from the popularity of this tweet, he's not the only one who feels this way.) He says many people use emails unthinkingly or as a quick way to toss responsibilities into someone else's court—the worst offenders, he says, are the nightmare email threads in which multiple parties volley dozens of emails just to schedule a meeting time. Newport suggests several ways to reduce the time you spend on the shallow work of unproductive emails.

1) Make Sure Your Emails Contain *All* Essential Information

Newport explains that when replying to an email, you should articulate: 1) the current state of things, 2) what the ultimate goal is, and 3) what the most effective next steps are. He says this prevents unproductive email volleys, where each email adds incremental information at the cost of distracting multiple people. It also closes the mental loop for you, preventing mental residue from accumulating.

For example:

- **Bad reply:** "Here's the edited draft. Thoughts?" **Good reply:** "I've reviewed your draft, added major comments, and made line edits for specific language. Things are looking good—you can take this to the final draft without running it by me again."
- **Bad reply:** "Yes, let's meet for lunch. When works for you?" **Good reply:** "Here are times over the next week when I'm available. If any of these work for you, let me know, and please send a calendar invite. If none of these work, please send over a few times that do."
- **Bad reply:** "Where were we on that project?" **Good reply:** "In the next week, send me your notes of everything we've discussed about the project. I'll combine it with my own notes, put them in a shared doc, and highlight the most promising next steps. Then, let's meet to discuss the problem—here are six times when I'm available."

He says that at first, writing these types of emails will take more time, but you'll save many more minutes in the future by cutting email volleys down.

(Shortform note: Newport takes the idea of closing the "mental loop" from David Allen's *Getting Things Done* system. When you fail to clearly define and delegate the next steps (no matter how big or small a project), you keep too many thoughts and unanswered questions on your plate and can feel scattered or unfocused. On the other hand, sending out emails that ask recipients for clearly defined actions lets you mentally put the project aside until the action is performed.)

2) Publish Your Email Policy, and Respond (Or Don't Respond) Accordingly

Make sure people who are interested in contacting you know how you'll handle incoming emails, and which emails you'll reject. (Shortform note: Newport recommends posting this information on your website. If you don't have a website, post it on other public platforms such as your LinkedIn page.) Newport suggests a clear message such as, "Please only contact me via email if you have a speaking engagement, collaboration, or introduction that you think I may be interested in. Please know that I may not reply unless it's a good fit for my schedule and interests."

He says that by publicizing the fact that you may not respond, you give yourself the mental freedom to ignore emails that aren't thoughtful or are misaligned with your goals. This frees you from the struggle to make the connection *meaningful* and puts the responsibility on the sender—if you haven't replied and they truly think their message is important enough, they'll follow up with another, hopefully more thoughtful, email.

While this policy may sound rude, Newport points out that the sender likely hopes for the same courtesy for

her own incoming emails and won't feel that you're being rude. He says that this worry is also based on the assumption that people care what you have to say and are pining for a response—but in reality, most email senders may not care that they get a response at all.

What To Do if You *Must* Answer Emails

Newport's practices aren't "one size fits all." While they might work for *some* knowledge workers—professors, authors like Newport—most knowledge workers aren't in a position to tell others what they will and won't respond to, and studies show that ignoring work emails is actually a sign of ineffective management and makes you look unconscientious. Other authors offer suggestions on ways to approach email productively:

In *Indistractable,* Nir Eyal gives two key tips: process your email in batches and slow down your response time.

- **Batch processing:** Eyal suggests blocking off several periods during your daily schedule for reading email—having a dedicated time for email prevents you from task-switching to look at email during other parts of the day. During each processing period, tag your emails by urgency: "Today" or "This week." Then, block off some time at the end of the day to respond to "Today" emails and a block of time on Friday to respond to "This Week" emails.
- **Slow down:** He explains that humans have an innate need to imitate one another—if you reply quickly to a colleague, they'll reply quickly to you. Simply slow down this exchange, either by processing your emails in a batch at the end of the day or adjusting your email settings to send off emails at a selected time in the future. Not only will you receive fewer emails, but the emails you *do* get will be more thoughtful—by taking the pressure of a quick response off the other party, you allow them time to think through their response.

Adam Grant, author of *Give and Take*, says it's okay to ignore *some* emails—such as those from people with no relationship to you asking you to share content on your social media or make introductions. However, he explains that you should also think of your inbox and the way it connects you to others as a useful tool, rather than an annoyance or hindrance to your goals.

Exercise: Reflect on Your Distractions

Try to align where you spend your time with your life's most important goals.

What is one of your most important goals? It can be professional or personal. (Choose just one. You can redo this exercise for other goals.)

What are the most important activities you can do to progress toward this goal? List no more than three.

List the major ways you spend your time that are *supposedly* in pursuit of this goal. These might include the Internet (websites, apps, tools) or activities offline. For each, answer: Does using this contribute meaningfully to my most important goal above?

If you think it's a good idea, how can you shift time from the distractions to the most important activities?

Chapter 6: Train Your Focus

As we said earlier, most beginners can only do about an hour of deep work at a time, but you can train your brain to focus for longer and longer stretches of time. Newport offers several techniques for this.

1) Let Boredom Happen

Newport points out that most people, in idle moments like waiting in line or waiting for the oven to preheat, reflexively pull out their phones for a quick scroll through social media or their texts. He points out that by always filling in these low-stimuli moments with a high-stimuli activity, you deplete your brain's ability to tolerate boredom.

Even if you set aside time for deep work, you won't be able to *do* the work during that time unless you strengthen your brain's "focus muscles." Newport suggests consciously letting yourself be bored in these low-stimuli moments.

- For example, if you're waiting outside of a bar for your friend, consciously resist taking your phone out. Instead, just sit still and take in whatever's going on around you.

Over time, your brain will be able to go for longer periods of time without seeking high-stimulus activities like scrolling the Internet or looking at your phone.

(Shortform note: Comedian Bo Burnham explores our toxic dependency on the Internet's endless dopamine supply and entertainment in his song, *Welcome to the Internet*. He describes the Internet as "a little bit of everything, all of the time" that we've become addicted to by design, resulting in a world in which "boredom is a crime." Warning: Crude language.)

2) Define Metrics of Success

Newport suggests creating a clear metric by which you can define the success of your deep work practices. He argues that this practice helps keep you focused on *doing* your work rather than on what you should be doing with your time or wondering if your results are "enough."

- For example, you might set a goal to write 500 words every 30 minutes—this way, your task is straightforward and you naturally get two simple progress checks per hour.

(Shortform note: In *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, Dale Carnegie offers another way that creating metrics of success can keep you on task. He says that setting small goals or challenges makes work—even work that's cognitively demanding or boring—a bit like an enjoyable game. This can prevent you from becoming bored or zoning out by re-energizing you and re-engaging you with the task. For example, if you're coming up on 30 minutes with only 400 words written, you'll likely find finishing those last 100 words an interesting challenge.)

3) Practice Productive Meditation

Newport describes productive meditation as thinking about a problem while doing a low-intensity physical activity, like walking or showering. This environment helps problem-solving in two ways: First,

the activity typically takes you away from distractions like your smartphone. Second, you train your ability to focus on the problem at hand, rather than daydream.

(Shortform note: There are numerous reasons why walking may be a particularly productive way to meditate on problems. Neuroscientist Shane O'Mara hypothesizes that walking naturally amplifies the neural activation necessary to problem-solving. This happens because your cognitive mapping functions—what some might call your "internal GPS"—are supported by the same systems that you use for problem-solving. In other words, reflecting and walking forces your brain to fire on all cylinders to support the two linked functions simultaneously.)

He suggests several practices to ensure that your meditation periods are as productive as possible and help increase your ability to focus on complex problems:

1) Preload the Problem

Don't go into your productive meditation period empty-headed because you won't have enough content to work with. Instead, figure out exactly what problem you want to think about in your meditation time. Remember to include variables that need consideration, and what the desired output or the important question is. For example, if you're working on a book chapter, the variables are the main points you want to make in the chapter. You can then work through how you want to flesh out the main points and sequence them in the chapter.

(Shortform note: Malcolm Gladwell explains in *Blink that your unconscious mind is constantly taking information that you've given it, finding connections within the information, and turning out solutions in the form of sudden insights*. By preloading a problem and its variables in your mind, you're feeding your unconscious mind the necessary information to come up with the most relevant and useful connections and insights possible.)

2) Notice When You've Lost Focus

Bring your attention gently back to the problem. This trains your mental muscles to focus and resist distraction. (Shortform note: Maintaining focus while meditating can be difficult, especially if you're the type of person who's always thinking of their to-do list. To help with this, try jotting down everything that's on your mind right before a meditation session—this helps get these distracting thoughts out of your head so you can meditate with a "clean slate.")

3) Beware of "Looping"

Looping is getting stuck on a problem at a superficial level you understand, without diving deep into areas that you're not sure about. This is a sign that you're just doing things that are comfortable for you, not making progress on the really difficult and meaningful parts.

(Shortform note: Newport recommends simply acknowledging that you're in a loop and moving on if this happens. If this step is easier said than done, you can try two other methods: First, try imagining "What if" scenarios. For example, "What if money wasn't an issue? Then what would I do?" Second, try to think of ten solutions (even seemingly absurd ones) for the problem to help you unlock any avenues you may be overlooking.)

4) Practice Memorization Techniques

Newport argues that if you learn to memorize effectively, you train your concentration muscle so that it

spills over into the rest of your work. He points out that memory competition champions seem to do well not because of any innate brain capability, but rather because of their memorization techniques and their ability to focus.

Newport suggests one technique in particular—memorizing the order of 52 shuffled playing cards. He says that through training in this technique daily for months, you'll increase your ability to do deep work, and you'll reach increasing levels of focus intensity.

How to Train Your Memory With Cards

Because people memorize images far more easily than an abstract string of characters, a particularly useful practice is to associate each card with an image, then memorize the images in order.

- Imagine walking into a house. Picture five rooms in the house.
- Picture 10 objects in each of the five rooms, then two objects in the basement. As you "walk" through the house, memorize the location and the look of each object. (The location of these objects is permanent.)
- Associate each of the 52 cards with a person or thing. For example, the Queen of Diamonds might be Beyoncé. The Jack of spades is Tom Hanks.
- Associate each of the 52 cards with the 52 objects, in the order you'd interact with them as you walk through the house. For example, Beyoncé is in the living room reading a book. Tom Hanks is in the living room sitting on the couch. Once you memorize this, you can "walk" through the house and recall what object is being interacted with by which person, and in this way recall the order of the cards.
- Remember that the objects *don't move*. When the deck is shuffled, the person (card) interacting with each object changes. For example, once you shuffle the deck, it might be Tilda Swinton sitting on the couch.

Different Techniques for Different Learning Styles

The technique of building a mental picture of the subject you're memorizing is useful in a range of situations and has a long history. In *Thank You for Arguing*, Jay Heinrichs describes how ancient rhetoricians would construct mental "memory villas," filled with symbols to help them remember important ideas, rhetorical techniques, and so on. They were focused and powerful in debates because they'd dedicate at least an hour per day to "walking" through their villas and memorizing the different symbols.

However, while this process of visual memorization has a long history and is used by many memory experts, research shows that the best memorization technique for you depends largely on your learning type—there are many: auditory, experiential, visual, tactile, and so on.

- For example, while associating cards with different images works well for a visual learner, an auditory learner would more likely benefit from associating each card with a specific song.

Shortform Commentary: Master Internal Distractions

While Newport discusses ways that minimizing environmental distractions will improve your focus, Nir Eyal points out that the majority of our distracted behaviors (up to 90% of the time) are due to an internal trigger

or discomfort, such as anxiety, stress, boredom, and so on. He suggests three exercises to help develop your ability to deal with internal discomforts before they become distracted behaviors.

First, take time to meaningfully *reflect* on your triggers and make more deliberate choices about your response to them. There are three steps to meaningful reflection:

1. Identify the trigger. When you're about to switch over to a distracting activity, ask yourself what feeling might be driving your actions.
2. Note the trigger in a "distraction notebook" to become more aware of your distraction patterns. Make note of factors like the time of day, where you were, your emotions, what you were doing just before becoming distracted, and the distracting action you took.
3. Commit to fully exploring the internal discomfort that drove you to distraction. Trying to suppress feelings often makes them stronger, while approaching them with curiosity can help them more quickly dissipate.

Second, rethink how you label yourself. You naturally align your behavior to fit the way you see yourself, so refrain from labeling yourself in a self-defeating way—for example, "easily distracted" or "incapable of deep focus." Instead, label yourself as "focused" or "able to sustain deep work" in order to prompt focused behaviors.

Exercise: Reflect on Your Feelings of Distraction

A helpful practice in training your brain to focus is paying attention to what internal triggers are driving you to distraction.

What are the feelings that usually precede a distracted behavior? (For example, you experience feelings of anxiety, boredom, or anger.)

Describe a situation where you often find that you're most easily driven to distraction—pay attention to both the activity and details such as time of day or who's usually with you. (For example, you might feel most distracted in your home office right after lunch or when you're trying to study in the library.)

Which of Newport's suggestions could help you act in a more productive way in response to these feelings? (For example, you might practice allowing boredom so that it doesn't trigger you to pull out your phone, or make a habit of taking a walk after lunch to think over your work.)

Chapter 7: Make the Most of Your Focused Time

Once you have the schedule and the environment, you must actually *do* deep work. Newport offers several suggestions to make the most of your focused time and environment.

The 4 Disciplines of Execution

Newport outlines four principles of deep work that come from the book *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*. During deep work sessions, use these principles to optimize your time and focus on the right things.

Principle 1: Focus On What's Important

When choosing what to work on, figure out what things have the largest impact. Then, instead of trying to say no to trivial distractions, **simply say yes to the most important task or goal.** This process helps crowd out shallow tasks that don't support your goals.

Newport recommends choosing only a small number of such goals so that you only have to focus on keeping trivial tasks out rather than maintaining a large list of things to accomplish.

(Shortform note: In *Built to Last*, Jim Collins outlines steps to creating "big, hairy, audacious goals," or BHAGs—he urges you to create goals that are clear, push you outside your comfort zone, and are aligned closely with your core values.)

Principle 2: Use the Right Metrics

Metrics are useful to figure out how well you're doing and how you can improve. The most useful metrics in deep work are *leading* metrics, or metrics you can use in real-time to tweak what your result will be. (In contrast, *lagging metrics* measure the long-term thing you're ultimately trying to improve—in other words, the result. These metrics give you feedback at the end, instead of real-time feedback that helps you change your behavior.)

- For example, Newport suggests leading metrics like the number of hours you've spent in deep work, the number of pages you've written, the number of new ideas you've generated, and so on. These are all examples of real-time feedback that help you see how effective you are at deep work. (A lagging metric would be how many papers you've published at the end of 2021—at that point, you can't go back and change your behavior in order to publish more papers in the year.)

(Shortform note: The authors of *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* warn that leading metrics are more difficult to measure than lagging metrics (for example, it's easier to measure how much you weigh—a lagging metric—than it is to measure how many calories you're eating—a leading metric). You'll have to make a habit of collecting data on your leading metrics.)

Principle 3: Keep Your Metrics Visible

Making your leading metrics visible will motivate you to keep up the habit and allow for more frequent celebration of successes. Newport suggests keeping a physical display in the workspace that shows your leading metric, like a small whiteboard where you mark off hours spent in deep work.

- Furthermore, for each of these hours, you might mark off what you accomplished in that time. Newport says this will make clear what concrete goals you've achieved in deep work.

- He also suggests sharing metrics across your team if you work with other people—he says this will allow friendly competition to increase the metric.

(Shortform note: Studies show that continuously celebrating small achievements and feeling a sense of progress is a fairly easy way to boost your overall happiness—this is important because the strongest indicator of productivity is the way you *feel.* Research reveals that when you feel positively toward your organization and motivated by your work, your productive performance naturally increases.)

Principle 4: Create Accountability Where Possible

Periodically analyzing your deep work will keep you honest about how well you lived up to your goals. Newport explains that this exercise will show you where you can improve. He suggests two practices:

1. Set up a weekly review to see what you've achieved in the past week and make a plan for the coming week.
2. Reflect on whether each week was "good" or "bad" and what led to each outcome. Where possible, make changes to your schedule to cut out factors that led to negative outcomes.

(Shortform note: If you struggle with making behavioral changes based on a review of your own behaviors, you might try adding a more social aspect to your accountability practices. In *Indistractable,* Nir Eyal recommends social precommitments, which make it harder for you to perform undesirable behaviors. For example, you might make a precommitment to have someone else review each week's deep work report. You're more likely to stay away from shallow work and focus on hitting your goals because of the added pressure of being "watched" by someone else.)

Learn to Say No to Shallow Work

Newport warns that like most knowledge workers, you'll face invitations to partake in various forms of shallow work, such as meetings, committees, and travel. He suggests saying no to this shallow work by **providing a vague enough response that the requester cannot find a loophole that they could use to get you to say yes.**

- For example, you might say, "Sounds interesting, but I can't make it because of schedule conflicts," or, "Thank you for inviting me, but I won't be able to make it."

You might feel bad saying no, but avoid giving a consolation prize (for example, "I can't join the committee, but I'm happy to look at requests as they come along"). Newport says that this just keeps the door open for more shallow work that you don't want to do and may have to say no to.

(Shortform note: Critics point out that in many industries, it's important for each team member to contribute back to the group—it's unfair to expect others to take on shallow tasks while you refuse to do them. Newport's role as a professor isn't an exception to this expectation: Joining committees, networking, and doing other shallow tasks are becoming increasingly vital parts of finding employment in academia.)

Give Your Mind Time Off

If you're the type to want to be productive, it may be tempting to spend every waking hour working. Newport thinks this is a counterproductive mindset, and that you should instead deliberately shut off your work and let your brain relax. He gives a few reasons for this.

1) Overworking Isn't Deep Working

First, as mentioned before, even experts can only accomplish four hours of intense concentration each day. At the end of the day, your brain is exhausted and is usually at its least effective. If you try to push through and continue working, you'll often waste your time doing shallow work slowly or doing tasks that don't need to be done at all.

(Shortform note: In the long term, avoiding overexertion of your brain helps you do much more than avoid time-wasting tasks—studies show that people who get more sleep, take more naps, and use more vacation days perform better and avoid burnout more than those who don't.)

2) Your Brain Works Better When It Can Relax

Newport says that giving your brain time to relax is useful for solving difficult problems. His argument arises from two theories of thought:

Unconscious Thought Theory

The subconscious parts of the brain are constantly working in the background to solve problems, in ways you can't perceive. This subconscious work is high bandwidth and sifts through lots of possible solutions. In a stressful environment, such as one where your brain is overworked and given no chance to relax, your subconscious is less effective at this.

(Shortform note: Researchers say this explains why some surprisingly good insights come at odd times, like while in the shower or driving a car—in these moments, your brain is relaxed and allowed to wander through problems.)

Attention Restoration Theory

Your ability to focus is limited and needs to be regularly recharged. Deliberately setting aside time to relax today improves your focus tomorrow.

(Shortform note: You may find it difficult to switch your brain over from work mode to relaxation mode. Researchers recommend low-key activities like walking, crafting, and gardening that keep you a bit busy but allow your mind to unwind.)

Ritualize Your Workday Shutdown

To fully get your mind off work and relax, Newport suggests creating a shutdown ritual. He says this ritual should help you check your work for anything you forgot and plan your next day's work.

Here's an example ritual:

- Check your emails for any last urgent items.
- Update your to-do list of unresolved items.
- Check that each unresolved item has a completion date.
- Look through your calendar to make sure there aren't important deadlines you forgot.
- Make a to-do list of tasks for the next day.
- Say, "All done," or a similar phrase to explicitly mark the end of work.

(Shortform note: You may want to add reflective time into your workday shutdown—research shows that employees who spend 15 minutes at the end of their workday reflecting on what they learned during the day perform about 23% better in their work than those who don't take time for reflection.)

Newport stresses that an important benefit of the end-of-day ritual is that it helps reassure you that things will be fine when you shut down. You'll never be able to finish all your important work in one day. When you create a shutdown ritual, instead of feeling anxious about unfinished tasks, you'll feel confident that all the important tasks are accounted for, and that you'll make meaningful progress the next day. This gives you more time to fully relax in your time off from work.

(Shortform note: This ritual also sets clear boundaries between work and not-work, which is especially important as more knowledge workers begin to work from home.)

How Employers Can Help Normalize Relaxation

Even if your employees incorporate shutdown rituals into their workday, it may be difficult for them to relax completely unless you demonstrate that it's okay—expected, even—that they truly leave their work out of their time outside the office. In *Dare to Lead*, Brené Brown suggests several ways to do this:

- Apply boundaries to *yourself*—if you don't want employees sending emails on the weekend, you shouldn't be sending emails on the weekend.
- Don't praise employees who brag about their exhaustion or how they gave up vacation or weekend time to catch up on work. Speak to these employees privately and reiterate your expectation that they take the proper time to rest. Publicly praise employees who go offline during vacation or tell you about the fun events they did over the weekend.
- Never punish employees for not immediately responding to a work crisis that happens while they're off the clock.
- Ask employees to let you know of any times you *cannot* reach them outside of work, and respect those times.