

How to focus and write when working from home

By Ana Pineda, Phd

Article published in March 2020 as a blog post [here](#).

I had a different post ready for this week, but in light of the crisis we are currently living through, and with thousands of scientists working from home, I thought about contributing with a more practical topic. I cannot say much about viruses and pandemics, but... I have worked a lot from home (like in years scale), and do plenty of google research trying (often failing) to be more productive and stay sane. With these credentials ;), here are the strategies that I would recommend you to try:



Plan your week with lots of writing!

Planning your week (and doing it ahead) will allow you to have a clear picture of your important tasks without getting lost in your to-do list. You can [download here](#) a weekly planner that I have created for you (with all my love, as usual!) to help you put the content of this post in practice. You can start writing the to-do-list, and identify 3 tasks/projects that you will work on today, finish this week, and in 3 months. Did you ever try the 4-cells Eisenhower box to classify your tasks whether they are important and urgent or not? Well, 90% of my tasks appeared to be urgent and important... so I want to propose to you a further classification (inspired by the amazing MBOM podcast). I would like you to label your tasks whether they are pivotal for your work (or not), and how much mental energy they require and consume, and give them an order to be done based on this. To give you some examples, writing the discussion of a paper is pivotal but it needs all my energy (whereas I find the methods much easier), so it is one of the first things in the day. Most of your meetings may not be so pivotal but they will require energy and may stick in your head for a while (especially if you are an introvert). For those tasks, you can either schedule them later in the day or give yourself time to regain that energy.

		Requires energy	Low energy
Non-pivotal	Pivotal	1 Write introduction/discussion Start/finish any project Statistical analysis ...	2 Write M&M, results, figures Planning ...
	Non-pivotal	4 Content of a presentation Prepare a class Emails ...	3 Revise other people's work Meetings ...

Schedule your golden hours, and write!

Golden hours are those when you are most alert, motivated and inspired to get your work done. Most people will have the golden hour in the morning but otherwise do it when it is best for you. I try (not always manage) to schedule 4 golden hours in the morning for my most important work. And what's most important for you?... Yes, writing (articles, grant proposals,...)! Especially now, many of you need to prepare classes online, but to not feel lost in that new world (of cameras, audio, lights, software...) be sure you first spend some time writing.



Get ready to work

Establish a working routine trying to start and finish always at the same time, and very important...have a shower and get dressed (yes, you can wear comfy clothes)! Staying in your PJs the whole day sends wrong signals to your brain. Please be sure that you have the best possible working environment, and especially that your desk, chair, and computer are in proper alignment to avoid RSI.

Shut down external distractions

Because for every distraction, it takes us 23 min to go back to the point where we were! To those having kids at home, please don't stop reading, and next week we'll have a post especially for you. But for those that thought that this was gonna be a highly productive writing retreat, be careful with your expectations because you probably have the internet... So, my tip is to remove all notifications from your computer (email, skype, etc.), and...tachaaan! Place your telephone in another room in silence or not disturb (that setting where only calls from your favorite list come through). I know, this seems impossible but it is the best way of staying focused (scientifically proven). When can you look at it? See next point ;)



Don't check your email, internet, or your phone until lunchtime

Ok, this may sound too much, but at least try it ;) Especially now, reading bad news in the media, WhatsUp, and emails will occupy your mind with disturbing thoughts and may even cause some anxiety. If you feel you REALLY need to sneak a look at the world situation, please be selective and do it shortly before starting to work (never as a break activity between working moments). And remember, stop checking your phone a couple of hours before going to bed.

Manage your emails mindfully

On top of not checking until lunchtime (repeating it here, yes!), schedule only one more time before the end of the day. Set a timer for it, so you don't spend hours working on emails. Then you can follow these rules: 1) always read my emails ;); 2) work on those emails that have an action that can be done in less than 2 min; 3) write in your weekly planner up to 5 important emails to work on this week. Keep in mind that when you spend your time on emails, you are working on somebody else's urgency, not yours! Try to switch some of those emails by calls for more personal interaction, we'll all need more of that these days.

Be aware of procrastination

Procrastination, in case you never heard of it, is the lack of self-control that stops you from doing what you should. It is a big mental block when working from home, and especially when writing. The first step to stop procrastinating is to be aware you are doing it! My top 3 strategies: 1) break projects into smaller and easier tasks, for example, instead of "work on paper", write "finish introduction of paper"; 2) find accountability, and tell people you'll finish/send something by X date; 3) use some online tools that will cut your internet for a certain time (in case you are wondering, I have used this a lot...). We'll have a post soon more detailed about procrastination, so stay tuned! And if you still procrastinate, be nice to yourself, the latest studies suggest it is part of the creative process!

Include self-care and mindful breaks

Try every hour to stand up and do some stretches, get some water, etc... If you need a break, please don't grab your phone! Instead give yourself a mental break, such as a mindful walk (if you are allowed), a deep breathing exercise, or a meditation (you can [download here this 7-min one](#)). Identify at least one self-care activity to do every day (mine would include some yoga, a beach walk, a bath, a nice dinner,...). And now more than ever, don't forget to do some exercise (did I already recommend you to try Yoga?), sleep a lot, and have a healthy diet with simple meals. Spending time outside and having some sunlight cures almost everything, so if you can, please do it!



Being productive may be important, but being healthy should be now, and ever, your number one priority. Above all, don't set too high expectations in this period and be flexible and compassionate with others, and with yourself. I know I write about this all the time, but please try to meditate ;) It will help to manage your stress levels, anxiety, negative thoughts and the much-needed focus we need to work from home. And to start practicing gratitude, you can write down in the planner 3 things to be grateful for each week. If you found this post useful, please [download the weekly planner](#) with mindfulness

resources (I have included links to some yoga videos and meditations), and start planning your week right now!



Note: While I was finishing up this blog post, some scientists I admire have also written about doing research in this difficult time with a stronger focus on mental health. So if you want to keep reading, have a look at this post by [Meghan Duffy](#) or this link by members of [Gina Baucom lab](#).