Take on procrastination and distraction:
Steps you can take to make sure you stick with it when you need to study

How often have you thought about the fact that you procrastinate? How often do you find yourself being distracted when you study? If you’re like most students, chances are you think about these things often.

But with procrastination and distraction, we are talking about things that by there very nature may be hard to act against, even when you are aware they give you problems. In other words, you may be procrastinating on addressing your procrastination!

One of the reasons people procrastinate is that the work before them is big but not clear. They don’t see a first step leading to a next step, they see a problem needing a solution. And because their vision is vague, the problem feels unsolvable. The procrastinating brain will actually think, “well, if I can’t see what to do, I can’t do anything.”

Actually, there are a number of small, practical things you can do – each of which will put you in a better position to handle procrastination and distraction when they arise. In other words, they are great first steps.

Gather intelligence
This first step is really about “Knowing your enemy”. Because lack of clarity about what to do first is often a procrastination trigger, this step is actually kind of a “pre-step” intended to get you to simply think better about procrastination and distraction. It’s especially low-key and stress free because you can do it any time and just for the heck of it.

Gather information, and use your browsing to build your motivation. A good way to get yourself moving along the path to overcoming these obstacles is to learn more about them and reflect on how they affect you as an individual. Try Googling procrastination tips, or search youtube for videos on it. Yes, it may be procrastinating if you are doing this instead of your homework. And it will be a waste of your time if what you learn doesn’t eventually get turned into action. But thinking about what works for you, and why you struggle in the first place will keep the topic and the need front-and-center.

Procrastination’s greatest trick is when we procrastinate on trying to defeat it. The more you think about it, the likelier you will be to take action. And once you’ve seen an action that makes sense to you, you’ll be likelier to want to try it.
Plan your defense

A key to making strategies work is to put them front and center and get them ready before you go off to battle. In other words, prepare for the eventuality that you will be distracted and stop working once you are in the middle of studying. Know that it will happen is not enough. The time for preparing your defenses is before you go into the field. For example:

Let’s say you have decided that when you are using your laptop it’s so easy to switch over to a game of a social media website that you do it almost without noticing. So when you studied up on strategies you read something about apps you can download that will lock out websites on your computer for a set period of time. Don’t wait until study time to give it a try – set yourself up in advance.

If you are going to set your laptop to block websites and apps that you might easily click over to when your attention wanders:

i. Decide which ones
ii. Practice using an app if you will be using one
iii. Actually timing things is HUGE — especially as a motivator and a reward (example: if you start a timer on a commitment to stay on task for 30 minutes, and get antsy around 20 minutes, it always helps when you can say “I have to push for just ten more minutes and then I can take a break and feel good about myself at the same time”. If you will be using any timing strategies, decide what you will use for a timer. Your phone? Or would you rather have your phone buried in your bag? Do you want to try a website that plays focus music and sounds for fixed lengths of time.

b. In keeping with the timing strategy: set distraction breaks. In other word, if you are burning to play your video game while solving math problems, you might choose to make getting a quick round of something in as a break time activity. That way, your break time reward doubles: you feel like you reached a goal, and you get to play. Dopamine City!

c. Always remember your water bottle and some snacks. Cliff bars, granola bars — those are the best (at least among processed foods that can fit in your bag)

Plan an exit strategy from break time

d. Help bring yourself back: nothing is worse than making it to your reward — break time — and then getting so distracted you either don’t get back to work when you should, or you can’t re-focus when you get there. Its like taking a nap to refresh yourself, but it goes on too long and when you try to wake up you are foggy all day.

i. Use multiple timers: set one for the length of your breaks as well as one for the length of your session.

ii. Focus on break activities that do not tax your reactivation energy.

1. When you move from one task to another, your brain needs an adjustment period where it shifts from what it was thinking about to what it needs to be thinking about. This takes a lot of mental energy. And when people are in
that in-between mental space, where they know they need to get started but can’t focus on what or where, this is a perfect storm for distraction. Your brain will grab something it can make sense of and run with it.

2. A good remedy is to use your breaks for brain-refreshing activities. Walking and stretching help clear your head and restore your circulation of oxygen, water and other nutrients to your brain. Moreover, when you take a walk (around the library, to a coffee shop or vending machine, etc) You can still sort of low-key keep your mind on your work. Not working it out per se, but just kind of getting aware of what you are studying.

3. Get more water. Drink more water. Your brain is mostly water. If you begin to dehydrate, your brain suffers a lot.

4. Do you need coffee too? Snack?

**Create your “Wedge” statements and practice them**

   e. We often don’t notice we have distracted ourselves until we have been distracted for a period of time. for example, if you find yourself staring at a notebook page and realize that for the last ten minutes you were thinking about an upcoming party, you’ve wasted some time. And getting refocused will waste more time.

   A wedge statement is something you think up in advance and plan to have occur to you in the moment you become distracted. In other words, it’s something you can tell yourself that will quickly pull you back. It might be something as simple as “oops, OK, seven more minutes and I can take a break”. If you find it harder to pull yourself back, you might want to think of something more motivational, like how important your success is to yourself, or your mom, or whomever you can think of that would make you say “I am doing this. I have to give it my best.”

   f. Remember, just like with meditation, the improvement comes with practice. You can GUARANTEE that you will become distracted and your goal shouldn’t be to not get distracted. Instead, make your goal to notice when you are distracted, and refocus yourself. As you get better with this, you notice sooner, and eventually you also stay focused longer.