

Composition Forum 35, Spring 2017

Composing Focus: Shaping Temporal, Social, Media, Social Media, and Attentional Environments



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Abstract: Writers must learn to control factors that influence the ability to focus, especially in what some call a culture of distraction. In our efforts to promote metacognition and flexible writing processes, writing teachers need to engage students in study and discussion of factors in our temporal, social, media, social media, and attentional environments that influence focus while composing. This article examines these facets of our contemporary scenes of writing by reviewing recent research in composition studies and psychology about writing and attention, discussing the results of a survey of undergraduate writers' composing practices, and sharing insights from assignments that help writers notice important elements of their environments. The article recommends assignments and questions to encourage reflection on writers' interactions with these elements in order both to find focus and to promote process-related transfer and adaptability in our ever-changing scenes of writing.

The *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* includes “developing flexible writing processes” as a key component and encourages “flexibility” and “metacognition” as two crucial habits of mind for success in writing. To encourage this development the *Framework* recommends we ask students to “reflect on how different writing tasks and elements of the writing process contribute to their development as a writer” (np). Building awareness of the physical, cognitive, and emotional elements of composing can be challenging. The processes themselves are more involved than many writers realize. Charles Bazerman notes that even experienced writers do not usually pay attention to process unless the writing project poses new challenges (147). Focusing in order to write well—cultivating what Bazerman calls a “writing state of mind”—is complex:

The writer needs to build skills to return to the mental place of writing where a perception of the task and situation has formed an impulse to communicate and is crystallizing in a set of meanings and textual forms. Letting the mind refocus and reassemble its internal attention and resources toward written action is a form of meditation and mental composure. Beginning writers may only be able to visit such a writing state of mind in the presence of supportive mentors, and each writing session is a fresh start. [. . .] Even at university level, facilitation by an instructor or tutor at crucial junctures helps students focus on a writing task and overcome difficulties that might lead to loss of direction and vitiation of attention. (150)

Finding focus for composing can vary with location, time of day, and writing project, so diagnosing how we interact with our mental and physical environments in order to write is a crucial element of writing process transfer. Michelle Cleary's study of the transfer of process knowledge in non-traditional age students led her to conclude that this transfer is so complex that writing teachers should be “more strategic in helping students [...] develop awareness of their process knowledge not only in writing but also in other ‘activities’” so they can consciously make analogies across contexts to aid in the transfer of behaviors (678). Dana Lynn Driscoll and Jennifer Wells' recent research about transfer of writing abilities emphasizes affective orientations or dispositions as a crucial part of this dynamic. A conversation about writing process transfer must make visible the often invisible affective dimension of composing along with cognitive choices and physical writing behaviors against a backdrop of perennial challenges to focus, including from digital connections.

But for my students, who almost unanimously tell me that they never pay attention to their writing practices—that

they just write—even the visible behaviors can seem invisible. Recent writing process research emphasizes the complexities and idiosyncrasies of writers' interactions with tools, texts, people, and activities within specific environments, stressing that writing practices are far more individualistic than monolithic (Prior and Shipka; Roozen; Cleary; Van Ittersum and Ching; Portanova). Paul Prior and Jody Shipka trace the complex interplay of cognition and emotion in writers' "environment-selecting and structuring practices" (ESSPs), guiding us to notice how writers choose and shape where and how they write to "regulate thought and affect, to channel attention and action" in order to accomplish their writing goals (228). To promote effective metacognition about writing practices, we need to help our students notice and reflect on how they structure their composing environments.

Research and Pedagogy to Draw Attention to Attention

For the past several years I have asked my writing classes (from first-year college writing to upper-level writing in the disciplines and advanced composition) to study their own writing habits. Some of my classes conduct writers' self-studies (similar to Wardle and Downs' "autoethnography" described in *Writing about Writing*), while all read articles about composing practices, attention, productivity, and multi-tasking; students reflect in journal entries and class discussions to connect their practices with the readings.

Survey Design and Participant Demographics

I became curious about how widespread some practices were (like composing in isolation or around other people, watching video, or listening to music, etc.), so I designed an IRB-approved survey that included the practices my students had described (see [Appendix 1](#) for the survey). The survey included a "Writing Practices Inventory" asking about activities involved with planning, drafting, and revising as well as a section about writing environment. Additionally, it included a section called "Writing Attitudes Inventory" adapted from common beliefs and attitudes about writing discussed by Charles Bazerman in *A Rhetoric of Literate Action* and psychologists Maria Gardner and Hugh Kearns in their article about beliefs that hinder writers' productivity. In this article, I analyze data from this survey (related to writing environment) along with research from the fields of composition studies, psychology, and education as well as insights from my students' self-studies and resulting class discussions. I then suggest some pedagogical applications of these insights including writing, reflection, and discussion activities in and out of the classroom. I hope that these resources can lead students to greater awareness and more purposeful manipulation of their environments—temporal, social, media, social media and attentional—for more productive composing.

Four hundred and fourteen students (53% female and 47% male) enrolled in required general education English classes volunteered to complete the survey during spring 2014. These courses include English 100 (Introduction to College Writing), our one-semester course for first-year students on academic writing and research; English 200 (Introduction to Literature), an introduction to literature and literary analysis that counts toward the humanities component of general education requirements; and English 300 (Writing in the Disciplines), focusing on research-writing conventions in the disciplines. Students in English 100 classes made up 39% of respondents, with a median age of 19. English 200 students comprised 30% of this sample, with a median age of 19. Students in English 300 courses made up the remaining 31% and had a median age of 21. These courses, since they are taken by students in all majors, represent a cross-section of the university population. Our university is a public, Master's granting university of just over 20,000 students, 87% of whom are undergraduate. Located in a city of 60,000 in south-central Kentucky, we draw many students from the surrounding rural counties as well as from cities in Kentucky and neighboring states. Sixteen percent of our students come from other states (mostly nearby states to whom we offer reduced out-of-state tuition rates) and 7% from other countries, with Saudi Arabia, China, and Brazil sending the largest numbers. The three most popular undergraduate majors are nursing, elementary education, and biology. The average ACT score of incoming students in fall 2014 was 22.2.

Data Analysis—Evolution of Codes and Categories

The categories I use below (temporal, social, media, social media, and attentional) evolved from class discussions of research articles and writers' experiences. As I began to analyze the insights from the articles, our class discussions, and the survey responses, I asked: How do writers choose and control their environments to maximize their cognitive and emotional abilities to focus and to minimize distractions? This question developed to include another: How are these choices and practices to manipulate focus different for different writing tasks or stages of a writing project? I conceptualized the domains related to focus as "physical," "virtual," and "mental." As I looked within these contexts for overlapping practices among the research articles, survey data, and my students' experiences, I noted specific factors within those areas. Within the categories I coded as "physical" and "virtual," I developed the more specific codes to describe social interactions (described below in the "social environment" category), media ("media

environment”), and communication with people via digital media (“social media environment”). “Media,” for example, included music (with or without lyrics), tv/video as background or not, etc. The category I originally called “mental” environment, including attitudes toward time and types of mental focus (direct/ tight vs. mind wandering, ideas from the psychology literature) evolved into “temporal” and “attentional” to better describe these distinct aspects of our mental experience of writing. The research we read and discussed in class along with my students’ studies of their writing sessions helped me to see that each of these dimensions that could be a distraction or challenge to focus had the potential to be support as well. I began to code in my notes for examples of “distraction” or “support” within each of these categories (social, media, social media, temporal, and attentional). Accordingly, the discussions here emphasize those contrary potentials to disrupt or sustain focus for the factors and practices within each category. For example, the presence of other people similarly focused on an academic task could be a psychological motivation or an emotional support—a buffer against loneliness. Similarly, media that might seem to be a cognitive distraction could provide affective comfort and prevent disruptive feelings like boredom. Virtual communication might be essential for planning later meetings and not feeling socially isolated. My analysis sought to tease out ways that these variables could affect writers’ emotional and cognitive focus and how writers could recognize and manipulate these variables to make their environments more conducive to focus.

Shaping Temporal Environment

Often deadlines provide writers the urgency needed to compose. The focusing power of a deadline is described well by a student in Michelle Cleary’s study of writing process knowledge: “I’m writing my persuasive. It’s not due until Monday, but I’m writing it now ‘cause I have a busy weekend. But that anxiety of ‘I got to do it now’ makes me focus, makes me grip, shut out the world, and I hammer it out” (Cleary 684). One of the most widely bemoaned writing problems—procrastination—exemplifies the difficulty of marshaling enough mental focus and emotional motivation to start writing. More procrastination is reported on writing papers than on any other academic task, a finding that has held steady over the last three decades. In a 1984 study, Laura Solomon and Esther Rosenblum found writing to be the most commonly procrastinated task among college students (more than studying for exams and reading assigned texts) with “46% of subjects report[ing] that they nearly always or always procrastinate on writing a term paper,” while even more, 65%, “wanted to reduce their procrastination when writing a term paper” (505). In a study almost two decades later (2002) of procrastination and writing, Beth Rapp Young and Barbara Fritzsche found that 38% of the college writers in their study claimed to procrastinate “always” or “nearly always” when writing a paper (48). Furthermore, this tendency crosses cultures: A 2010 study of college students in Canada and Singapore found writing to be the task on which students procrastinated most (Klassen, et al. 371). To better understand how writers shape their environments to start writing, we need to consider that for some, procrastination is a strategy for structuring the temporal environment, although not always a successful one.

Worry about the task of writing can lead to engaging in other tasks to delay getting started and to several counter-productive beliefs that prevent writers from writing. Maria Gardiner and Hugh Kearns, psychologists who have used cognitive behavioral coaching with thousands of writers, draw on this experience as well as an extensive review of literature about writing problems to conclude: “When writers are faced with a writing task that they know someone else will read and judge or when they have multiple competing demands or both, the dominant response of many writers is to not write at all, or to write very slowly” (251). They note that research finds that delay and displacement activities are typical for many writers.

Researchers distinguish between active procrastinators who choose to procrastinate for the “strong motivation under time pressure” but can meet their deadlines with acceptable results and passive procrastinators who are “traditional procrastinators” who delay because of poor time management abilities (Kim and Seo 1100). Recent research suggests that active procrastination is associated with a “flow” state, described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as a “state of total involvement in an activity that consumes one’s complete attention” (qtd. in Kim and Seo 1101). Csikszentmihalyi notes that in order for flow to occur, the challenge of the activity must be balanced with the individual’s skill level: Too high a challenge in proportion to skill leads to frustration while too low a challenge leads to boredom (111). Psychologists Eunkyung Kim and Eun Hee Seo theorize that the time constraints added by active procrastinators, along with providing motivation (a necessary component of flow), also raise the challenge involved to bring it in line with the students’ skill level in order to achieve a challenge/skill ratio that is conducive to flow (1108).

In addition to waiting until the deadline nears to start writing, some writers further add to the temporal urgency that forces focus by tweaking their digital environments. Writing studies researchers Derek Van Ittersum and Kory Lawson Ching analyze several productivity bloggers’ (sometimes called “lifhackers”) descriptions of their writing processes using new “distraction-free” writing software. They note that the bloggers show “a keen interest in tools that can motivate them, inspire them, or focus their attention” (n.p.) One of the software programs described by Van Ittersum and Ching applies “negative consequences” to make writers aware of time. Its “kamikaze mode” begins to

delete text if writers stop writing for longer than the “grace period” they select; reminders and unpleasant sound files provide the negative consequences in less extreme modes. To similar ends, a student in Patricia Portanova's study about multitasking devises his own negative consequences to enhance temporal urgency: He often writes in the library on his laptop but without his charger “so that he will have the added pressure of a depleting battery to motivate his writing” (81). These efforts illustrate how writers use time pressure in order to start writing and maintain focus.

In class discussions, some of my students recognize themselves in the description of the active procrastinator working to achieve flow. They acknowledge delaying getting started on a writing project so that the temporal urgency forces them to focus intently. Some note that the only writing they do ahead of the deadline is what they have to do in class. The students I surveyed were fairly evenly split on the ideas that time pressure best motivated their writing (see [Figure 1](#)). In response to the statement “I write best under the pressure of a close deadline,” 40% agreed (17% strongly and 23% somewhat). Another 41% disagreed with the statement (15% strongly and 26% somewhat), with 19% neutral. The students who appreciate time pressure may have had success as active procrastinators in the past. The other group may feel uncomfortable or even extremely anxious with a close deadline.

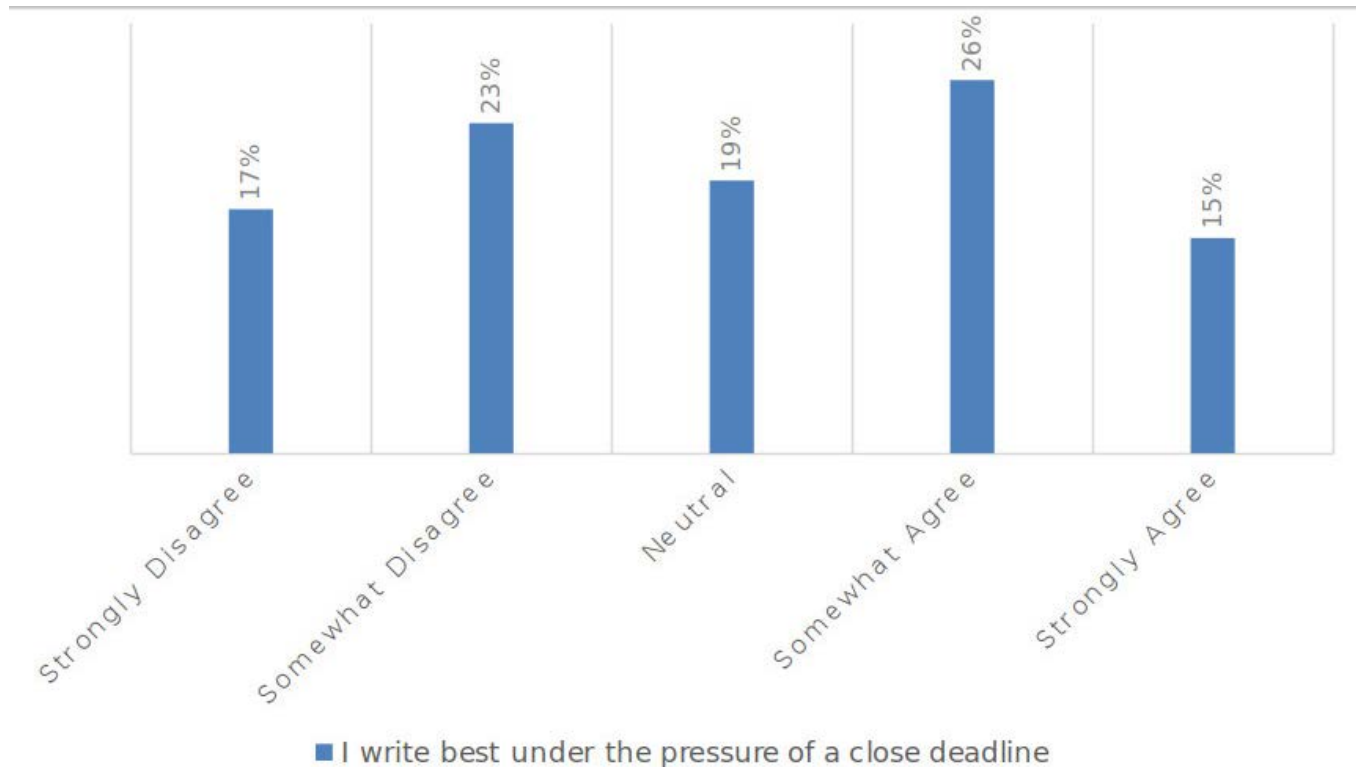


Figure 1. Time Pressure as Motivator

With such a clear divide among students' attitudes toward the motivational force of a deadline, more nuanced discussions about procrastination and delay could lead many students to helpful self-knowledge. The perception that there is either writing or distraction from writing is a viewpoint we can work to complicate with our students as they reflect on their own writing practices and attention strategies. Writers need to recognize which activities of “not writing” shape a mental state to motivate writing and which are counter-productive distractions to be avoided. Some active procrastinators might choose not to feel as guilty about delay. But they should also realize that underestimating the difficulty of a new type of writing assignment could throw off their estimation of when they need to start. The increased challenge of unfamiliar expectations can raise the challenge to a level conducive to flow so that time pressure alone is not crucial to prevent boredom. Writers could also devise other smaller deadlines (including writing center visits) before their final deadline or manipulate their digital environment (using software with timed repercussions or the awareness of a depleting battery) to create the urgency they need to focus.

Shaping Social Environment

While we often associate physical isolation with writerly productivity, our physically isolated settings today are not always socially isolated since we may bring our virtual social connections and media streams with us into solitary spots. Just over a quarter of a century ago, Linda Brodkey argued in “Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing” that our conception of writing was negatively shaped by the modernist image of “a solitary writer alone in a cold garret

working into the small hours of the morning by the thin light of a candle” (396). Brodkey suggested that this image of writing hurts us because it brackets off any social aspects of writing, encouraging us to “recreate a garret and all that it portends whether we are writing in a study, a library, a classroom, or at a kitchen table” (397). The prevailing influence of the “writer-writes-alone” conception that Brodkey and others describe still shapes our writing habits in strong ways even though technology has tremendously complicated what it means for a writer to find solitude. Accordingly, our discussions about environment need to consider whether and how these isolated spots might overlap with less visible social interaction that could be more distracting than the presence of other people who are also at work. Additionally, finding the ideal social environment for concentration may vary depending on the writer’s mental climate and the writing tasks that need to be done that day. Charles Bazerman notes how choice of place to enhance focus depends on his frame of mind: “I work at places conducive for concentration, depending on my mood, whether it is at my desk with a cup of coffee or in a quiet corner in a coffee shop if I feel I need others around me (though not disturbing me) to help me concentrate” (151). Sometimes the psychological focus of a shared workspace can be a powerful motivator to keep working even when the cognitive challenge is so great that distractions are tempting. One of my students wrote about sometimes—depending on the stage of the project—being unable to focus in a coffee shop because she could not tune out others’ conversations. But even though the aural distractions were counter-productive, she found she needed a visually stimulating background—like sitting on her porch with cars and people passing—in order to avoid the temptation to text or check Facebook out of boredom. She chose this moderate visual stimulation of people at a distance to keep herself from seeking digital social updates that could be significantly distracting. This type of self-awareness is a powerful addition to a writer’s metacognition about process.

Almost twice as many students in my survey favored isolated composing spots to those who did not (see [Figure 2](#)). Forty-seven percent said they frequently “write where nobody else is around,” 20% claiming to do so “always” and 27% “usually.” A much smaller segment (27%) favored composing around other people, with 9% claiming to never write in isolation and another 18% “rarely.” Students said they write in their bedrooms, dorm rooms, or apartments most frequently—72% chose this spot usually or almost always. The selection of this spot could be isolated or not, depending on the presence of roommates. The second favorite locale was a place “where other people are quietly studying like a library or computer lab”: 34% chose this usually or almost always. Yet the “coffee shop or similar setting” was rarely used to write: 60% said they never wrote there and another 15% did so rarely (this response may reflect the dearth of coffee shops near our campus).

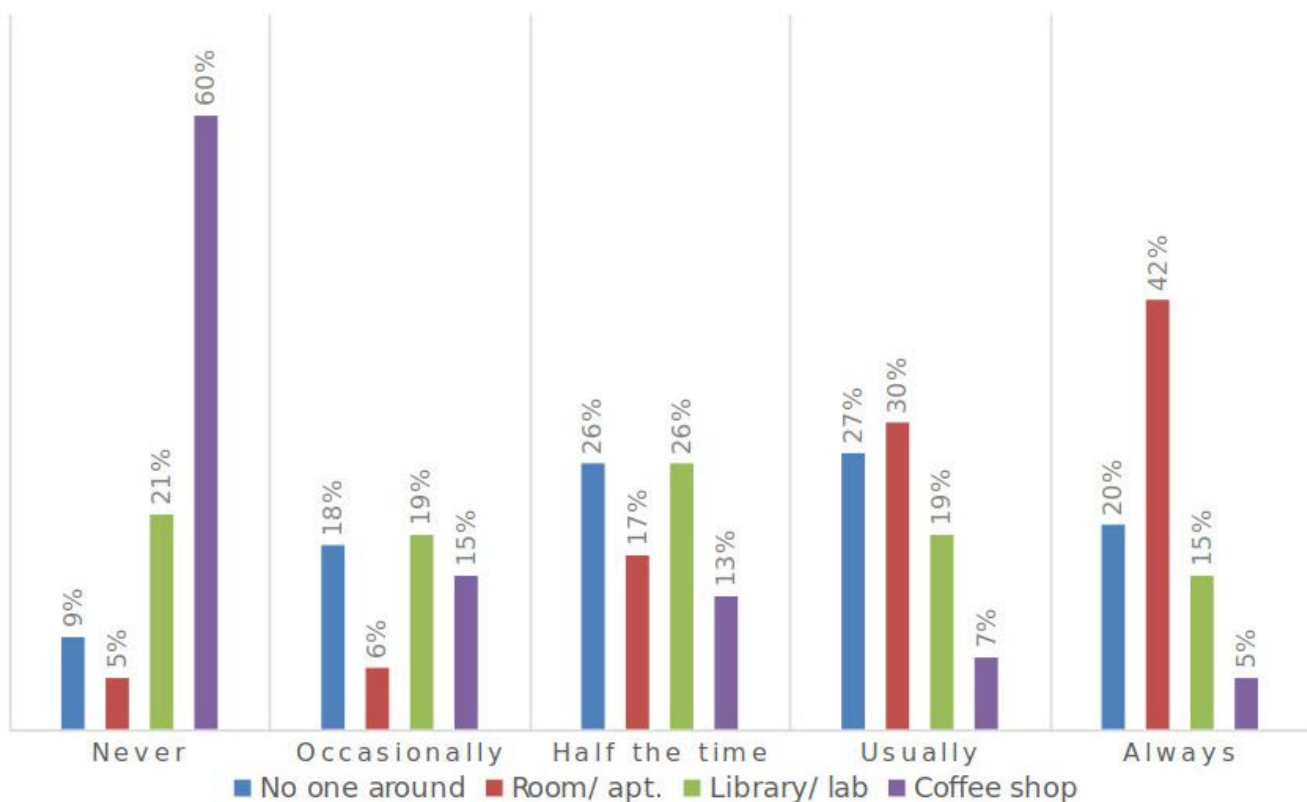


Figure 2. Location for writing

In their self-studies, some students compared writing in private versus public environments, first writing in their dorm room or bedroom and then in the library or other study space. Many surprised themselves by discovering that they were better able to resist the urge to check their phones or surf the internet in the public setting since they had

assumed that greater physical isolation would lead to better ability to focus. However, like Bazerman, they found that the presence of others quietly working could sometimes aid concentration. Two students in Stacey Pigg's study, "Emplacing Mobile Composing Habits," preferred writing in a coffee shop and computer lab, respectively, and offer interesting insight into how the settings motivate them. Pigg notes that for these writers, such "semi-public" places "sometimes facilitate a delicate balance of social access and restriction by helping writers control social availability while maintaining proximity to needed people and materials" (252). This concept of semi-public space where the individual is not expected to interact with other people who are similarly working and studying is a composing environment that many students may not consider. Based on my survey results, the room or apartment has an inverse relation (and much greater popularity) than the coffee shop setting. The library or computer lab has more even frequencies of use, from a low 15% for "always" to 26% for "half the time" with the other rates around 20%. Collaborative explorations of composing practices with our classes could encourage more students to question and experiment with the assumption that physical isolation from others necessarily leads to the most productive social environment.

Shaping Media Environment

It is difficult to generalize about media factors as distractions for writers. Interested in the ways writers manage distraction, composition scholar Patricia Portanova surveyed and interviewed students about their multitasking and writing habits and then asked them to write short papers with varied media stimuli for each. She found that students with good metacognitive awareness of their composing processes and environments wrote best under experimental conditions that mirrored their typical media use while composing—whether this was silence, listening to a particular type of music, or even reading and responding to texts or social media communications (109). The more metacognitively aware students in her study (who usually were not first-year students) also understood which media made more demands on their attention and typically adjusted their media use to coordinate with their stage in the writing project or the intellectual demands of the assignment (115). Thus, for these self-aware students, familiar media used during composing did not appear to hurt the quality of their writing. However, some activities like invention and generating text did suffer when students wrote with unfamiliar media or social media interruptions. Portanova's study suggests that our students should pay attention to what constitutes distractions in their own experience and what media could benefit their productivity with some writing tasks.

Some students may scrupulously limit digital communication (what I'm calling the "social media" dimension) as they write but opt consistently for a media dimension of background music and/or video. Some researchers suggest that students use music or video while studying for affective reasons. Psychologists Wang and Tchernev found that college students who multitasked with media while studying said they did so for "habitual" reasons like background noise; however, they were more likely to continue to do it because they found it emotionally gratifying or enjoyable even if the studying was less effective (510). Media multitasking may be strongly connected to affective needs and easily habit forming even if counter-productive. However, for some the affective boost from media may outweigh the cognitive distraction. A student in Portanova's study reported needing music to make the setting more pleasant and enable him to keep writing: "It's kind of something [...] so I can just consciously just get the paper done in one sitting. That makes it less work and more enjoyable to do" (113). Many of my students describe in their self-studies using music to increase their enjoyment and energy for the task of writing.

Survey data from writers in my study suggest that their writing environments are frequently filled with media chosen as background and not a primary focus of their attention; music is an especially popular choice. While very few students claimed regularly to watch TV or videos *not* for background noise (only 3% percent said they always did this and 5% usually did), a few more favored TV/video in the background: 14% always had the TV or video on as "background noise" while another 12% did so usually. Many more, though, usually avoided video or TV while writing, with 36% saying they never watched TV or video while writing and another 19% rarely watching it. Even more said they never (50%) or rarely (23%) used TV or video for background. Audio-only input, however, is less avoided. While just under a quarter (23%) claimed to usually or always listen to music without lyrics when writing, more than 41% do usually or always listen to music with lyrics as they write and another 20% do about half the time (see [Figure 3](#)).

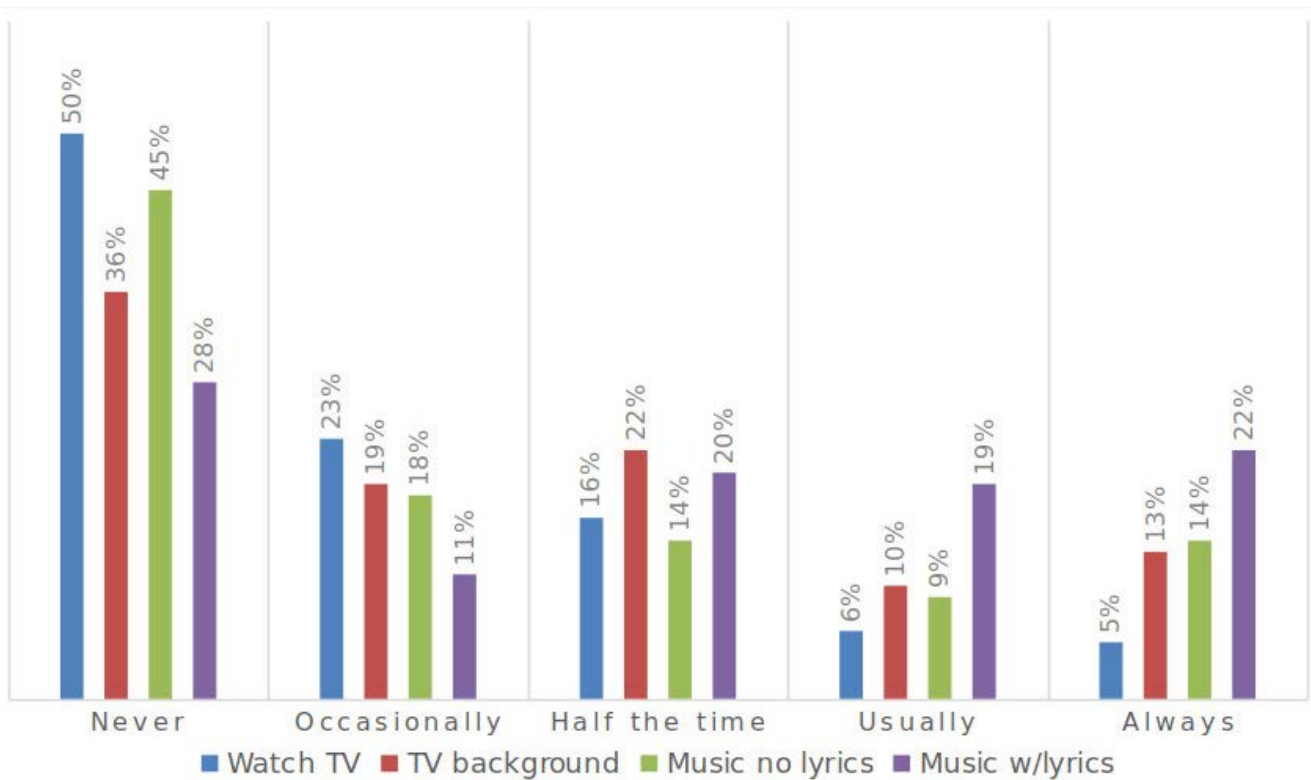


Figure 3. Media input

Many features of music beyond the presence or absence of words can affect whether it distracts writers. Researchers have found that even if the music is instrumental, a faster tempo and greater complexity of elements decreases listeners' reading comprehension; but listening to music can "enhance arousal levels and mood" (Thompson, Schellenberg, and Letnic 701). Some of my students describe in their self-studies that they need some upbeat music in order to get pumped up enough to write. Individual writers should experiment to see what types of music work best for them if at all. The writer's experience composing with that type of music can be a crucial factor in whether it functions as support or distraction. Portanova found that one student who usually composed listening to hip-hop or instrumental music wrote smoothly in the experiment while listening to his familiar playlist but halted his writing for five minutes when she had added in a song by Johnny Cash (82). Additionally, in some situations, listening to music may provide not only comfort and motivation but also a way to tune out environmental distractions. In my students' self-studies, many noted that listening to music through headphones aided focus in settings like a computer lab or classroom filled with typing and talking. One of my students described listening to movie soundtracks while he wrote since it was music intended to complement attention to the movie's action and not draw too much attention to itself. Others noticed that the types of media they could tolerate while still focusing changed with the stage of the writing project; for example, television or music with lyrics might not bother them during planning activities, but instrumental music or silence was better for drafting and revising.

Shaping social media environment

Many students do check social media frequently while studying, whether out of a need for connection or from boredom. Psychologist Larry Rosen and his colleagues observed over 250 middle school, high school, and college students as they studied in their homes; they found that the students averaged only six minutes on a study-related task before shifting to some distraction like checking social media (955). The top two reasons the participants gave for why they interrupted their studying were "texting" (68%) and "boredom" (63%) (955). In another study that looked at how students perceived the effect of instant messaging on their schoolwork, students claimed they knew it was a disruption but said they still continued to do it (Junco and Cotten).

But not all digital communication has the same effect. A recent study found lower GPAs for students who texted or used Facebook while doing schoolwork, but did not find the same effect for talking on the phone or email (Junco and Cotten). Part of this effect of lower GPA for Facebook users could be related to the intensity of engagement with Facebook that could draw attention from other mental tasks since some research has found that its users are often in a "flow" state (Maurizio). Because it can be so engrossing, Facebook and similar social media could be more distracting than other digital communication. Or heavy social media users could be more distractible. Other

researchers have found that students who Facebooked while they studied tended to switch tasks more frequently during a 20-minute study period than those who did not (Judd).

Some might assume that these social media connections are solely interruptions that disrupt writers' cognitive engagement with their writing. While it is important to note negative effects of these social intrusions into study time, they may also reflect crucial social support, sometimes specifically for writing. Texts may come from friends checking up on study progress and arranging post-study activities. They could even help in working out ideas for one's writing project. In a study of the daily writing habits of college students, Stacey Pigg and colleagues found that the norm is for students to continually send and reply to text messages throughout their other activities. Some found the expectation of continual response "burdensome" while others found it "sustaining," but it could not be ignored ("Ubiquitous Writing" 110).

For the students who participated in my study, electronic communication was more present than absent in their composing environments. Thirty-four percent said they usually or always check Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram while writing papers (15% always and 19% usually). More survey participants usually or always check email than send emails as they write: 23% as compared to 14%. But a much greater number never (27%) or rarely (25%) check email, and even more never (43%) or rarely (25%) send it. Texting is much more common: Students equally engage in frequent checking and sending of texts as they write (46% said they do both usually or always and another quarter say they do so about half the time (see [Figure 4](#)). In contrast, 17% said they never send texts and 15% that they never check texts while writing their papers. Only 13% said they always or usually turn off their phones or put them away; 68% said they never or only rarely do so (see [Figure 5](#)).

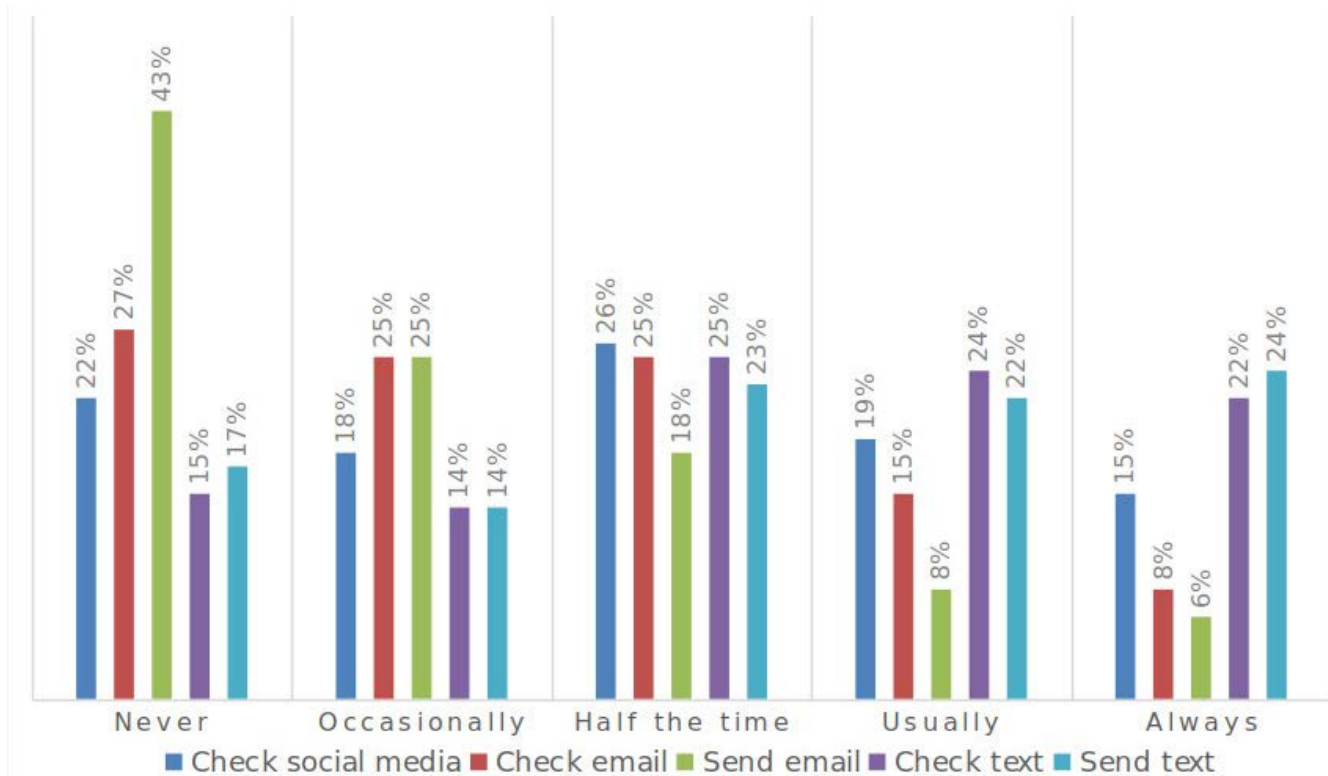


Figure 4. Digital Communication

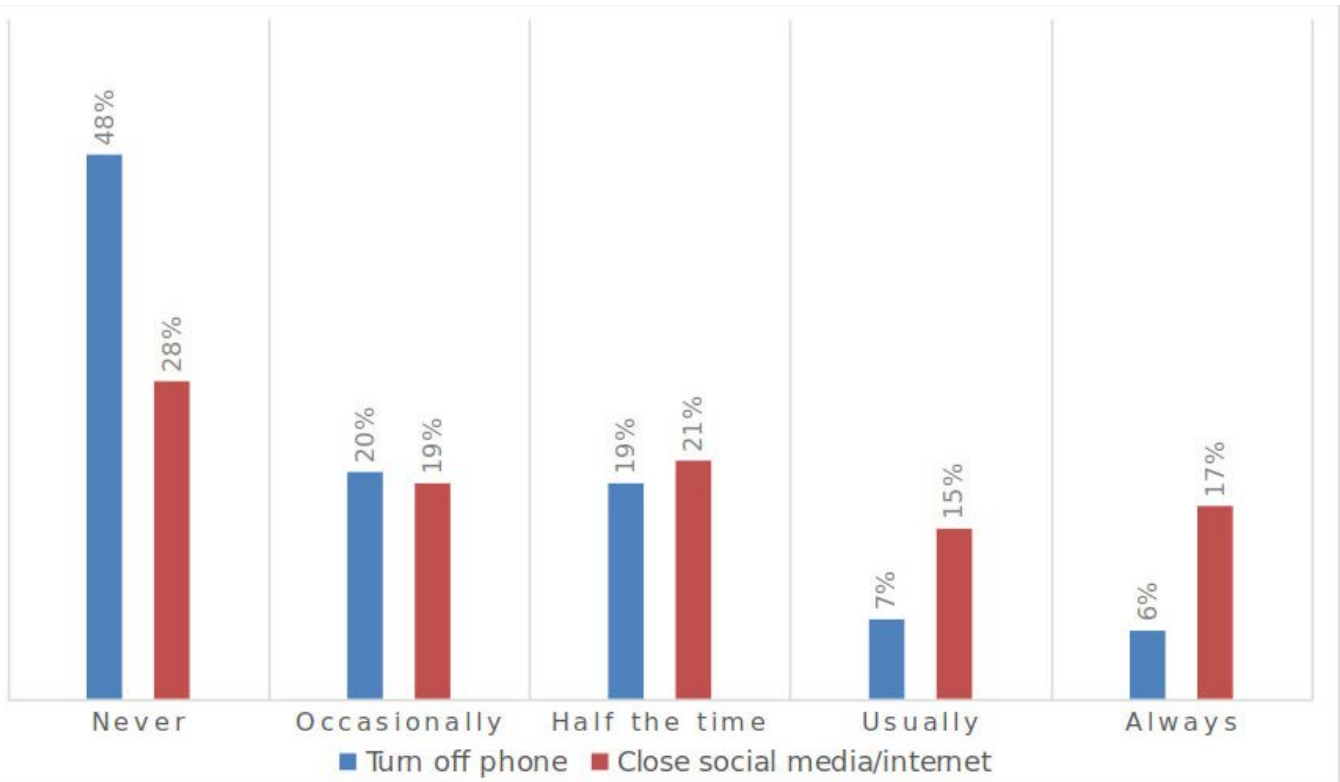


Figure 5. Turn off phones/social media

Based on my survey, though, college students do not often discuss paper ideas in digital venues. Only 3% said they usually or always discussed ideas for papers on Facebook, Twitter, email, or blogs. Just 6% claimed to discuss ideas in digital environments about half the time, 12% rarely, and the other 79% never (see [Figure 6](#)). So while many writers may derive sustaining social support in general from their texting or social media contacts, very few seek direct advice or insight about their papers. If writers did develop the habit of using social media to discuss their ideas, they might find benefits both for developing ideas and for maintaining the interest and motivation needed to write.

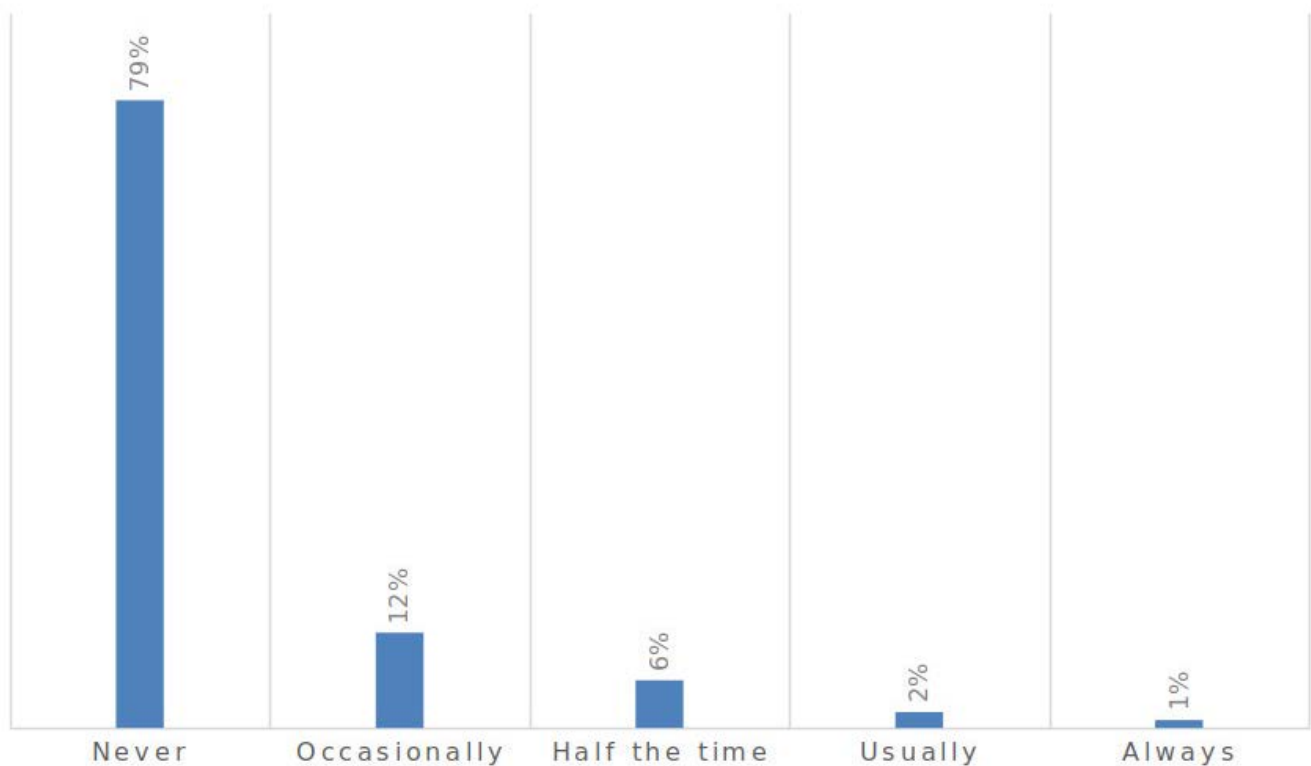


Figure 6. Discuss paper ideas digitally

Regardless of the reason for the contact, writers need to learn how to manage digital communication so it is a less

disruptive interruption of their thought and work. One student wrote in her self-study that even though she always kept her phone beside her on the table as she wrote, she found she could focus much better if she flipped it over so she did not see alerts when she received texts. Even a short phone call can lead to a much longer time to reclaim lost thought threads. One writer noted that following a phone call of just under two minutes, she spent twelve minutes looking back over her sources to find where she stopped. Being aware of that common phenomenon can lead to techniques to refocus more quickly. Literature on interruptions and resumption time suggests that taking just two seconds before responding to an interruption to jot down what to do next can greatly reduce the time needed to resume the task (Trafton and Monk). And students may discover that just glancing at a text or alert rather than responding can alleviate the need to know what's going on without completely breaking their focus for composing. Even breaks that are planned can disrupt a writer's focus significantly. Several students have written in their self-studies about taking a short writing break by checking social media but then getting so absorbed that they could not manage to refocus on the writing project and had to stop writing for the day.

Shaping Attentional Environment

When is not-writing integral to writing? Van Ittersum and Ching contend that the users of distraction-free writing environments they studied tend to see the production of words on the screen as the only relevant activity. Everything else is “not writing” and “since they are not ‘writing’ as such, those other activities constitute distractions that divert attention away from the task at hand” (n.p.) A crucial part of developing a writer's metacognition includes honing a sense for when not-writing is distraction or counter-productive procrastination and when it is necessary for renewal of focus, more research, and creative problem-solving. When we shift consideration beyond the cognitive to the affective or emotional, breaks of a certain kind, possibly with social interaction—or virtual social interaction—may be needed to boost flagging emotional energy or motivation. One student left this comment on my survey in answer to the question, “Is there anything you'd like to change about your writing process?": “Sometimes distractions can be a good thing because it's smart to get away from your writing so when you come back to it, your mind is cleared and ready to think!” Learning how to gauge what activities might dissipate focus or help renew it is an important type of self-awareness for writers to cultivate.

In *Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn*, Cathy Davidson reviews recent research and suggests that we have no more challenges to our focus than did people in other eras, but that recent striking changes in technology have compelled our attention to the issue of attention: “Our era may be obsessed with attention, distraction, and multitasking, but I'm convinced that these age-old concerns always emerge with new force whenever a major new technology makes us aware of habits, patterns, and processes that had been invisible before” (281). Davidson points to the now-famous phrase coined by technology designer Linda Stone, “continuous partial attention” and prompts us to stop seeing it as a problem and instead as a “digital survival strategy” because attention tightly focused on one task can cause “attention blindness” by ignoring other important things (287). Similarly, Linda Stone herself is quick to note that “continuous partial attention” is not necessarily a problem and that humans need to “have the capacity to tap the attention strategy that will best serve us in any given moment” (qtd. in Fallows 22). Stone explains that with the exception of some explicit teaching of attention strategies in the sports or performing arts, attention strategies are taught indirectly—modeled by adults and mimicked by children (qtd. in Fallows 22). Because attention strategies are more often the subtle products of enculturation than the conscious products of explicit instruction, our baseline behavior may be to not pay much attention to how we pay attention. Our usual surroundings are often things we pay little attention to; they are background.

Writers should also realize that focus is not either on or off. There are different types of focus that can be sought at different stages in the project. Recent psychological research suggests that “attentional control,” which is aided by greater working memory capacity, helps people solve analytical problems (like mathematical ones) by helping to “focus their attention, resist distractions, and narrow their search through a problem set” (Wiley and Jarosz 259). However, this type of tight focus is more useful in analytical problem solving than in creative problem solving. In fact, research from several studies shows that “too much focus can actually harm creative problem solving” because such problems need “either a completely original approach (i.e., restructuring) or a novel combination of diverse bits of information through remote associations in memory” (Wiley and Jarosz 259). Creative problem solving is certainly a frequent writerly need.

Conditions can be chosen to facilitate the type of loose focus needed to solve creative problems like those writers encounter at various stages of a writing project. Composition researcher Jody Shipka tells of a research participant shifting his focus in this way as he “described how when he lost sight of his [writing] project, got confused or frustrated, he would pitch a ball against a wall since this highly repetitive, focused activity would help him center and refocus on the task at hand” (Shipka 60). Prior and Shipka describe a similar practice of a professor who stops

writing every 45 minutes or so when the dryer buzzes:

As she empties the dryer, sorts and folds, reloads, her mind wanders a bit and she begins to recall things she wanted to do with the text, begins to think of new questions or ideas, things that she had not been recalling or thinking of as she focused on the text when she was upstairs minutes before. She perceives this break from the text, this opportunity to reflect, as a very productive part of the process. (180)

This tactic is corroborated in a recent psychological study of mind wandering and creativity that suggests “engaging in simple external tasks that allow the mind to wander may facilitate creative problem solving” (Baird et al. 1117). Writers who do not already seek out activities conducive to mind wandering when they get stuck in their writing might benefit from experimenting with tasks that allow loose focus.

Students in my survey, for the most part, did not claim to cultivate mind wandering to solve creative problems in their writing. In response to the statement “I do ‘mindless’ activities like doodling to get ideas if stalled in my writing,” only nine percent said they always did and another 14% usually. 21% claimed to do so about half the time, while the majority said they occasionally (25%) or never (31%) did (see [Figure 7](#)).

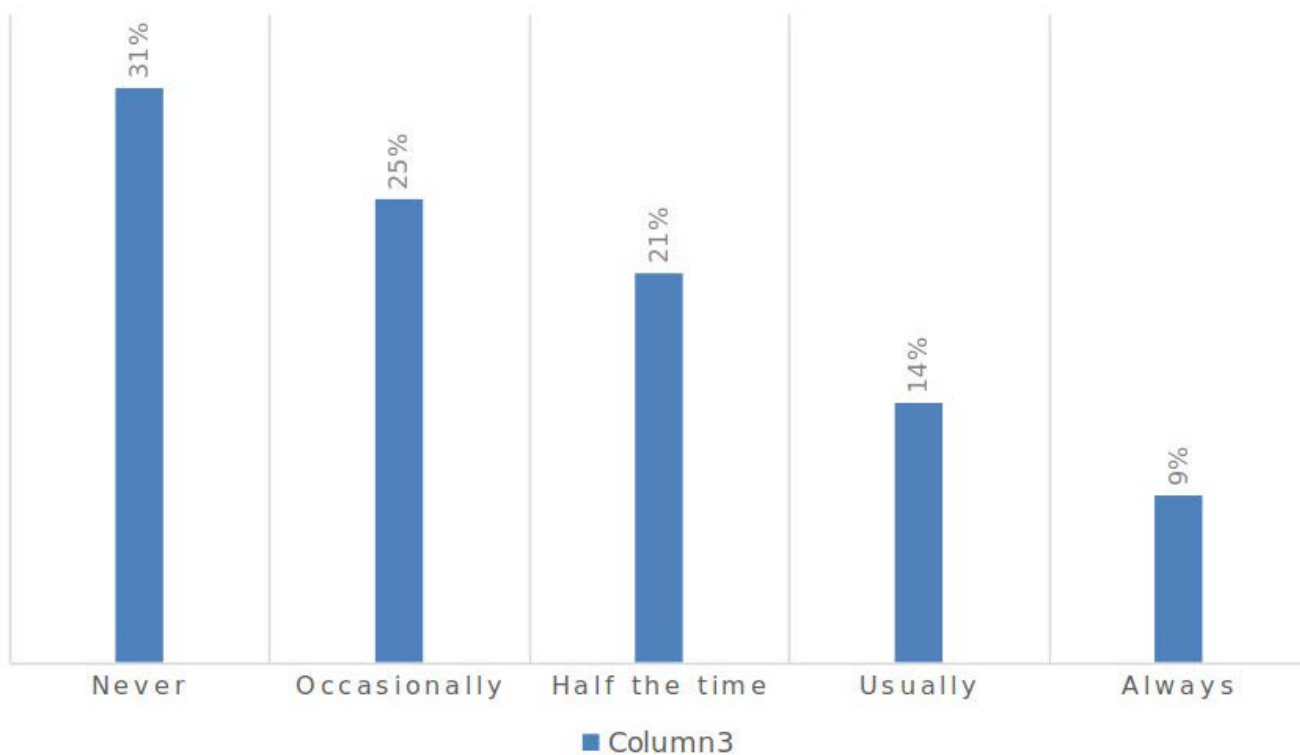


Figure 7. ‘Mindless’ activities like doodling

It is possible that students may do something similar more often than they claimed and that they just did not associate my description “‘mindless’ activities like doodling” with whatever action they favor. In their self-studies and discussions, my students have said that they like to stare out the window when stuck for ideas or go for walks. One student described purposefully watching movies he found boring to facilitate mind wandering and get new ideas for his papers. While these strategies might seem at first like distractions rather than focus tools, if writers could notice how this different kind of focus can help them in certain contexts, they could cultivate activities that broaden their repertoire of focus techniques.

Implications for Writing Instruction

Reflection and discussion to build metacognitive awareness and composing memory

As is often the case with composition research, the questions driving the research can also be taken up productively in the classroom to guide students to greater self-awareness of their writing practices. But this metacognition should be developed in the service of flexibility. Just as rhetorical awareness should culminate in adjusting textual features

and rhetorical strategies to fit the context, awareness of our writing processes should help writers, as Bazerman says, “manage them to best effect, and adjust them to fit the particulars of the task” (147). And the right focus for the task at hand may vary not only from project to project but also at different stages within a project.

Research about the transfer of writing knowledge suggests that metacognitive awareness is not easily formed. As Jarratt, Mack, Sartor, and Watson speculate in “Pedagogical Memory: Writing, Mapping, Translating,” their study about transfer of writing knowledge across classes, students who were not able to articulate any writing skills gained in their classes may have never been asked to reflect on the writing abilities and knowledge they were acquiring; therefore, “these students neither generated narratives of their own nor took up our [interviewers’] cues about connections between their various writing courses” (54). Similarly, a lack of invitation to create a description of how they shape their writing practices may result in some students never having a conception of their practices that they can access in order to consciously adapt them. But solitary reflection on their practices through journal prompts may not be enough to develop the kind of pedagogical memory that Jarratt et al. recommend we cultivate. They suggest that pedagogical memory is best developed as part of a “story relationship” with an addressee present (52). They theorize that narrating past writing experiences for the interviewer helped students in their research project develop “pedagogical memory,” an articulable awareness of their learning about writing, which they could then access more easily in the future. Similarly, students may develop a story of how they compose focus in conversation with other students in lieu of one-on-one questions with an interviewer. Students may hear classmates’ experiences that jog memories for them and allow process stories to emerge in conversation within the class. Incorporating Prior and Shipka’s practice of asking research participants to draw and explain their writing environments and practices for a specific piece of writing (182-86) is an enlightening activity for students to do in small groups that can prompt them to remember specific details of their composing environments.

One limitation of a survey to investigate writing practices is that it cannot capture the subtleties of context that align with a writer’s habits. A writer who claimed to write with a certain media input half the time (video as background, for example) may choose to avoid it the other half of the time for very specific reasons. Or their choices of environmental factors may be more determined by habit than conscious choice. Either way, this survey cannot capture those details and nuances. But understanding the details behind why a certain environment-shaping choice is helpful for a particular writer on a particular task at a particular time is essential in order to adjust skillfully to the needs of a writing context. In the above discussion of the survey data juxtaposed with contextual details from published research and my students’ experiences, I’ve tried to illustrate the complexities and speculate about possible effects of these factors in different situations. Opening these discussions to further speculation can engage students in conversations that may build accessible memories about process choices and make them better able to consciously adjust their composing practices and environments in the future.

Class discussions that target students’ challenges to composing focus and strategies for improvement can build metacognitive awareness of process and enhance future transfer. Each of the sections above about a different dimension of shaping the writing environment for focus could prompt such an activity. The discussion could begin with students reading the synthesis in the article section about that dimension of composing focus and contrasting their experiences. Students might also gain insight from answering some of the survey questions themselves (included in [Appendix 1](#)). But the discussion should emphasize the “why” behind the practices more than the “what” of the practices to supply the nuances of rationale and situational detail lacking from the survey data in this article. Then small groups could choose specific questions from the lists included in [Appendix 2](#) (Questions for reflection on dimensions of composing environments) related to each section. Some of these questions help students reflect on past experiences or current writing projects to identify strengths, challenges, or relevant factors in their practices. This question, for example, helps them connect details of audio input and composing task: “If you like writing with music, do you know when certain types of music might be better for certain stages of the project: style, lyrics, no lyrics, fast, slow, etc.?” Other questions suggest specific strategies that writers could try to improve focus in a particular situation: “Can you customize a helpful ‘soundtrack’ or playlist for a current writing project?” By moving from discussions of how they shaped past composing environments to considerations of problems they typically face and to strategies to address those challenges, students may build memories of composing choice they can access in order to adjust them in the future.

In my classes, students have shared strategies for many goals: getting started writing, staying focused while writing, maintaining motivation while writing, and getting back into writing or revising sessions smoothly after breaks or interruptions. Students discuss the pros and cons of delaying in order to motivate themselves with time pressure. Strategies for crafting an environment that avoids noisy roommates or blocks out distracting sounds are shared. Writers debate whether music (and what type) or silence works for them during what types of writing activities. Many students also relate techniques that control their impulse to check their phones or social media until they are ready for a break. Sometimes students pick up new practices to keep. Frequently, students express surprise in a practice they use (or its effect) that they had never noticed before. Together we broaden our conceptions of the scenes of

writing and how they can be endlessly adjusted to tune focus for different writers.

Experimenting with new techniques, in and out of the classroom

In combination with ongoing discussion, research, and reflection on issues of focus, the classroom can provide a space to facilitate experiments with new focusing techniques. Incorporating time for short writing sessions within class pushes students to start writing earlier than they might otherwise, to compose in shorter sessions than they usually think can be productive, and to write near others who are similarly focused on their task. I have had students write in class for as long as I have taught writing. But only recently did I involve them in explicit discussion about the implication of this in-class writing time for developing their focusing skills. Based on their in-class writing experiences, we talked about the benefit of starting to write to form ideas even when they are not clear to the writer. We discussed strategies for making shorter writing time productive, including always ending each session with a quick to-do list for the next session while those ideas were fresh. Some students observed that having the list to refer to made focusing much easier to achieve in the next writing session. They noted that before they ended short sessions with a goal list, they had been frustrated by the length of time it took to resume their train of thought. Interestingly, some students who had resisted the idea of writing in class because they thought the short sessions would not be productive and that other people would distract them actually found that the sections they composed in class were much better quality writing than what they wrote in their usual environments. Some attributed this quality to the lack of electronic distractions during the in-class writing sessions. The class environment for short writing sessions can become a de facto pseudo-experiment as they write in conditions that contrast with how they usually compose but perhaps closer to future workplace environments they might need to adapt to.

Some techniques for shaping their environments need to be tried out of the classroom. Formal assignments like an “autoethnography” (Wardle and Downs) can include changes in writing environment across writing sessions so they can describe the effects of these changes. But this type of environmental tweaking does not have to involve a formal self-study. The reflection journal prompts in [Appendix 3](#) (Journal Prompts and Reflection Questions) ask students to choose factors of their environment they would like to change while writing a paper for the class and to reflect on the impact of those changes.

Focusing on change, focusing through change

Academic writing is demanding for most people (myself included) for so many reasons. One student’s response to my open-ended survey question “What is the most challenging aspect of academic writing?” articulates many of the challenges I face as well: “Actually sitting down and focusing enough to compose the paper. Then composing the paper without becoming distracted, or wanting to do something else.” Wanting to improve focus is a widespread goal. But deciding where to start is not easy. I asked my survey participants: “Is there anything you think you should change about your writing process? If so, what?” While many responses did not specify focus at all (some wanted to proofread more, broaden vocabulary, begin researching earlier, get feedback from others, or not change anything), quite a few did refer to improving focus or reducing distractions as elements they would like to change, sometimes without much specificity: “I should *definitely* be more focused.” One student said, “Put away phone completely as well as focus on the task at hand (not worry about other classes)” then chose the likelihood of making these changes by circling “50/50 chance.” Quite a few students only gave themselves a “50/50” likelihood to make the changes. A few were more optimistic. One said “Reduce social media use—I have been getting better!” then circled the “very likely” option for chance of change. Another predicted change as less likely, claiming, “When writing, I shouldn’t watch TV or be on my phone as much,” then chose “not very likely” for the probability of change and drew a frowning face. Changing habits is not easy. But if issues surrounding focus are an ongoing area for reflection and discussion in the writing class, writers can discover many helpful strategies to try. They might also gain confidence and motivation when they realize that others face similar struggles.

The last quarter century has brought tremendous technological change, transforming our tools and practices for writing, communicating, and accessing information. As technology continues to change, adapting to new writing environments and managing the barriers and distractions to focus are challenges that will not go away. Composing focus involves strategic shifts in levels of focus among texts, people, media, and activities that provide affective motivation to write, tight focus on the content and choices of writing, and loose focus to allow idea incubation—among other considerations. Writing classes need to give students extensive practice not only in analyzing genres and matching rhetorical techniques to rhetorical situations but also in analyzing writing environments and practices and matching focusing techniques with writing tasks. The conversations (in class and in their writing) that we can facilitate about finding focus will build metacognitive awareness about these complex issues. The more we think about these concepts, the better able we will be to find practices and environments that work in the present and future as we continue our efforts to compose focus amid ever-changing scenes of writing.

Appendices

1. [Appendix 1: Survey Questions](#) (PDF)
2. [Appendix 2: Questions for Reflection on Dimensions of Composing Environments](#)
3. [Appendix 3: Journal Prompts and Reflection Questions](#)

[Appendix 1: Survey Questions](#) (PDF)

Appendix 2: Questions for Reflection on Dimensions of Composing Environments

These questions can be used along with sections of this article in class discussions about shaping environmental factors.

Questions for writer reflection about temporal dimensions

Does time pressure motivate you to write? When does time pressure become so unpleasant that it is counterproductive? What do you typically do in order to get started, in order to feel the urgency to write? What delay or procrastination activities help you start thinking about your writing? What activities lead to unproductive delay? Does your current writing project include unfamiliar or different elements that should make you start earlier? How can you design and enforce your own mini-deadlines before drafts of the project are due? Will setting up a deadline for someone else to read the draft—writing center tutor, friend, classmates—help you meet self-imposed deadlines? Does the idea that you need big chunks of time make you delay starting? What kinds of writing activities can you do well in small chunks of time? Might it help to take notes on sources or record dictation of your ideas before you start to draft?

Questions for writer reflection about social dimensions

Where are you most able to resist distractions and focus on writing? What distractions are you most tempted by? How do you need to manipulate your environment to start writing? Does it help you to have some people nearby who won't talk to you? Does it help to have people around with whom you can talk about your ideas as you develop them? Are there stages of your writing project when you need complete isolation to be productive? Are there stages of your writing project when you need the sounds/atmosphere of others working to motivate you?

Questions for writer reflection about media dimensions

Do you focus best with complete silence? If you like writing with music, do you know when certain types of music might be better for certain stages of the project: style, lyrics, no lyrics, fast, slow, etc.? Do you write with the tv muted? Do you usually write with tv on and unmuted? Does the medium-- pen vs. word processor vs. reading text aloud--help you focus on certain aspects of writing—generating text vs. revising vs. editing? If you have to compose in a public place, might listening to music with headphones help you tune out distractions? Can you customize a helpful “soundtrack” or playlist for a current writing project? Can looking at writing-related images on your computer help you get in a writing state of mind?

Questions for writer reflection about social media dimensions

Is it hard for you to resist checking social media notifications or texts while you write? Are you tempted to surf the internet for fun after getting online to look something up for your project? Do you close tabs to social media applications when you write? Where can you put your phone so you aren't tempted to look at it constantly? Do you ever use social media or email to get input on your writing or solve creative problems? Do communications with friends offer you encouragement on your writing or take your attention away from writing? Have you tried making notes about what you need to do next before you take a call or check a digital alert?

Questions for writer reflection about breaks and incubation

When do you need a break to refresh your thinking? What kind of activities tend to be hard to break away from when you need to resume writing? What kind of activities most refresh your thinking, lift your mood, or renew your

motivation? When you need to come up with ideas or figure out a problem in your writing, what kind of non-taxing activities can help: walking, doodling, cleaning, watching video that you're not fully paying attention to, looking out the window or watching passersby?

Appendix 3: Journal Prompts and Reflection Questions

These are journal prompts asking students to reflect on process and environment before and after writing papers.

(Before the first paper) *Reflect on your past writing practices:*

Describe your usual process for writing a short (2-4 page) paper. Where do you usually write? Include how much planning you do, how early you start before the deadline, how much drafting and revising you do. How many writing sessions and how long are they? Do you do anything differently for a longer paper?

Discuss the writer's challenges to getting started described by Gardiner and Kearns that overlap with your own along with strategies they suggest that you think might help you address them.

(After the first paper) *Reflect on your writing practices and environment from the first paper:*

1. Physically/socially: Where did you write, what other things and people were around you? Did you write some on paper or only on the screen? Can you identify any surroundings or practices that seemed to be especially productive or counter-productive to the quality of your product or the efficiency of your process?
2. Digitally/virtually: What media was in your writing environment (music, video, internet sites)? What kind of digital communication did you engage in? What electronic devices interrupted you? How often and for how long?
3. Temporally: How long did you write at a time and how often? What kinds of breaks did you take? What kinds of break activities? Seemed to help or hurt your focus and creativity once you began to write again?
4. Are there any ways you think you should change any aspects of your environment you discussed above?
5. Thinking back to the Gardiner and Kearns reading, can you think of anything you might want to do differently in future projects for this class?

(After each subsequent paper) *Reflect on your writing practices and environment for 2nd (or subsequent) papers:*

1. Did you try any strategies from Gardiner and Kearns for getting started?
2. Did you make any changes to your environment: physical, social, digital/media, virtual, etc. to improve your focus or productivity?

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"Composing Focus" from *Composition Forum* 35 (Spring 2017)

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