We know that our readers are distracted and sometimes even overwhelmed by the myriad distractions that lie one click away on the Internet, but of course writers face the same glorious problem: the delirious world of information and communication and community that lurks behind your screen, one alt-tab away from your word-processor.

The single worst piece of writing advice I ever got was to stay away from the Internet because it would only waste my time and wouldn't help my writing. This advice was wrong creatively, professionally, artistically, and personally, but I know where the writer who doled it out was coming from. Every now and again, when I see a new website, game, or service, I sense the tug of an attention black hole: a time-sink that is just waiting to fill my every discretionary moment.
with distraction. As a co-parenting new father who writes at least a book per year, half-a-dozen columns a month, ten or more blog posts a day, plus assorted novellas and stories and speeches, I know just how short time can be and how dangerous distraction is.

But the Internet has been very good to me. It's informed my creativity and aesthetics, it's benefited me professionally and personally, and for every moment it steals, it gives back a hundred delights. I'd no sooner give it up than I'd give up fiction or any other pleasurable vice.

I think I've managed to balance things out through a few simple techniques that I've been refining for years. I still sometimes feel frazzled and info-whelmed, but that's rare. Most of the time, I'm on top of my workload and my muse. Here's how I do it:

**Short, regular work schedule**

When I'm working on a story or novel, I set a modest daily goal — usually a page or two — and then I meet it every day, doing nothing else while I'm working on it. It's not plausible or desirable to try to get the world to go away for hours at a time, but it's entirely possible to make it all shut up for 20 minutes. Writing a page every day gets me more than a novel per year — do the math — and there's always 20 minutes to be found in a day, no matter what else is going on. Twenty minutes is a short enough interval that it can be claimed from a sleep or meal-break (though this shouldn't become a habit). The secret is to do it every day, weekends included, to keep the momentum going, and to allow your thoughts to wander to your next day's page between sessions. Try to find one or two vivid sensory details to work into the next page, or a bon mot, so that you've already got some material when you sit down at the keyboard.

**Leave yourself a rough edge**

When you hit your daily word-goal, stop. Stop even if you're in the middle of a sentence. Especially if you're in the middle of a sentence. That way, when you sit down at the keyboard the next day, your first five or ten words are already ordained, so that you get a little push before you begin your work. Knitters leave a bit of yarn sticking out of the day's knitting so they know where to pick up the next day — they call it the "hint." Potters leave a rough edge on the wet clay before they wrap it in plastic for the night — it's hard to build on a smooth edge.

**Don't research**

Researching isn't writing and vice-versa. When you come to a factual matter that you could google in a matter of seconds, don't. Don't give in and look up the length of the Brooklyn Bridge, the population of Rhode Island, or the distance to the Sun. That way lies distraction — an endless click-trance that will turn your 20 minutes of composing into a half-day's idyll through the web. Instead, do what journalists do: type "TK" where your fact should go, as in "The Brooklyn bridge, all TK feet of it, sailed into the air like a kite." "TK" appears in very few English words (the one I get tripped up on is "Atkins") so a quick search through your document for "TK" will tell you whether you have any fact-checking to do afterwards. And your editor and copyeditor will recognize it if you miss it and bring it to your attention.
Don't be ceremonious

Forget advice about finding the right atmosphere to coax your muse into the room. Forget candles, music, silence, a good chair, a cigarette, or putting the kids to sleep. It's nice to have all your physical needs met before you write, but if you convince yourself that you can only write in a perfect world, you compound the problem of finding 20 free minutes with the problem of finding the right environment at the same time. When the time is available, just put fingers to keyboard and write. You can put up with noise/silence/kids/discomfort/hunger for 20 minutes.

Kill your word-processor

Word, Google Office and OpenOffice all come with a bewildering array of typesetting and automation settings that you can play with forever. Forget it. All that stuff is distraction, and the last thing you want is your tool second-guessing you, "correcting" your spelling, criticizing your sentence structure, and so on. The programmers who wrote your word processor type all day long, every day, and they have the power to buy or acquire any tool they can imagine for entering text into a computer. They don't write their software with Word. They use a text-editor, like vi, Emacs, TextPad, BBEdit, Gedit, or any of a host of editors. These are some of the most venerable, reliable, powerful tools in the history of software (since they're at the core of all other software) and they have almost no distracting features — but they do have powerful search-and-replace functions. Best of all, the humble .txt file can be read by practically every application on your computer, can be pasted directly into an email, and can't transmit a virus.

Realtime communications tools are deadly

The biggest impediment to concentration is your computer's ecosystem of interruption technologies: IM, email alerts, RSS alerts, Skype rings, etc. Anything that requires you to wait for a response, even subconsciously, occupies your attention. Anything that leaps up on your screen to announce something new, occupies your attention. The more you can train your friends and family to use email, message boards, and similar technologies that allow you to save up your conversation for planned sessions instead of demanding your attention right now helps you carve out your 20 minutes. By all means, schedule a chat — voice, text, or video — when it's needed, but leaving your IM running is like sitting down to work after hanging a giant "DISTRACT ME" sign over your desk, one that shines brightly enough to be seen by the entire world.

I don't claim to have invented these techniques, but they're the ones that have made the 21st century a good one for me.

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Cory Doctorow is a Canadian-British blogger, journalist, and science fiction author and the co-editor of the blog Boing Boing. His website is craphound.com. This essay originally appeared in the online magazine Locus on 7 January 2009.

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