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The Deep Work Reset

Reclaim your focus, cut down context-switching, and ship the work that actually matters, in 8 modules over 30 days.

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Welcome

Welcome to The Deep Work Reset. You're here because some part of your working life feels scattered. Maybe you end full days with nothing important finished. Maybe you can't read a long document without reaching for your phone. Maybe the work you care about most, like the proposal, the book chapter, the code, or the strategy, keeps getting pushed to "later" by a steady stream of small, urgent things.

This course is a reset: a structured, 30-day way to rebuild how you use your attention. It's built around an original five-part method called **the Reset Loop**:

1. **Reveal:** see where your attention actually goes (Module 1, including your Focus Audit).
2. **Elect:** decide what work deserves your best focus (Module 2).
3. **Schedule:** build focus blocks into your real calendar (Module 3).
4. **Shield:** protect those blocks from your environment, your inbox, other people, and your own restless mind (Modules 4–6, including the Environment Design Guide).
5. **Sustain:** close each day cleanly with your daily rituals, recover well, and keep the system running (Modules 7–8, including your 30-Day Implementation Plan).

The term "deep work" was popularized by computer scientist Cal Newport in his 2016 book *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. We reference that book where it helps, and we recommend it as further reading. This course is not affiliated with or endorsed by Cal Newport or his publisher. The Reset Loop, the tools, and the worksheets here are our own method, designed to be used, not just read.

How to use this course

- **Go in order.** Each module builds on the one before. The audit in Module 1 feeds your choices in Module 2, and those shape your schedule in Module 3.
- **Follow the 30-day plan.** The workbook's 30-Day Implementation Plan maps every module to specific days. Roughly, you'll cover one module every three to four days, and the final stretch is about practice and review.
- **Do the Action Steps.** Every lesson ends with one, and each matches a numbered worksheet in the companion workbook (Lesson 3.2 goes with Worksheet 3.2). The worksheets are where the change happens. Start with the Start-Here Self-Assessment before Lesson 1.1.
- **Expect friction.** Rebuilding focus feels uncomfortable at first, like any training. That's normal and not a sign you're doing it wrong.

A note on scope. This is an educational productivity course. It isn't medical, psychological, or career advice, and it doesn't diagnose or treat any condition. Results depend on your situation and your effort, and no particular outcome is guaranteed. If you

suspect ADHD, depression, anxiety, burnout, or a sleep disorder is behind your attention problems, please talk to a qualified professional. The skills here can sit alongside that support but can't replace it. If you're in crisis or thinking about harming yourself, call or text 988 (US) or your local emergency number.

Open your workbook, complete the Start-Here Self-Assessment, and let's begin.

Module 1: Reveal — Why Your Focus Broke (and Why It's Fixable)

Before you can fix your attention, you need an honest picture of it. This module explains what's working against your focus, gives you a simple way to sort your work, and walks you through the three-day Focus Audit.

Lesson 1.1: The Distraction Problem Isn't a Character Flaw

If you've ever called yourself lazy, undisciplined, or "just bad at focusing," start here. Most people who struggle to focus aren't short on willpower. They're working in an environment built to break attention, using habits nobody ever deliberately chose.

What's working against you

Consider a typical knowledge-work day. Email arrives all day long. Chat apps show little red badges. Your phone buzzes with messages, news, and app alerts designed to win your engagement. Meetings chop the day into 30-minute pieces. And in many workplaces, fast replies are quietly treated as proof that you're working hard.

Researchers have measured what this does. In her book *Attention Span* (2023), informatics professor Gloria Mark describes years of workplace studies in which her team logged how long people stayed on one screen before switching. In her more recent measurements, the average was roughly 47 seconds. That isn't a moral failing. It's a trained pattern, and patterns can be retrained.

The hidden cost of switching: attention residue

In 2009, management researcher Sophie Leroy published a study on what she called **attention residue**. When people switched from one task to another without finishing the first, part of their attention stayed stuck on the old task, and they did worse on the new one.

Think about what that means for a "quick check" of email in the middle of a report. The check might take 30 seconds. But you return to the report carrying fragments of the email: the question you need to answer, the tone of that one message, the meeting that got moved. You're back at your desk, but not all of you is.

Many small switches add up to a day spent in partial attention. You're never fully anywhere, which is why a day can feel busy and unproductive at the same time.

Why it's fixable

Here's the encouraging part. Because the problem is mostly environmental and habitual, it responds to **design** more than to willpower. In this course you'll change:

- **What you work on**, so your best attention goes to your most valuable work.
- **When you work on it**, by building protected focus blocks.
- **Where and how you work**, by adding friction to distractions and removing friction from focus.
- **How you respond to others**, with clear, respectful communication norms.
- **How your mind handles the urge to switch**, through gradual attention training.

You don't need to become a different person. You need a different setup and some practice.

Reframing the goal

The aim isn't to become a machine that concentrates for ten hours a day. That isn't realistic or healthy. Most people can sustain only a limited number of hours of truly demanding focus per day. The aim is to:

- Protect a **reliable, repeatable amount** of deep focus on most working days.
- Point that focus at the work that matters most.
- Contain everything else so it doesn't leak into those hours.
- End your day with a clear head.

Imagine Priya, a marketing manager who feels she "never gets to strategy." Her problem isn't intelligence or motivation. Her strategy work has no protected home in her week, so it loses every time to whatever is loudest. When she gives it two 90-minute blocks a week and guards them, the work starts getting done. Not because she's trying harder, but because she's designed things better.

Three beliefs to drop

As you begin, notice whether any of these beliefs are running in the background:

Belief	Why it hurts	A more useful replacement
"I work best under pressure."	Keeps important work waiting for a crisis.	"I can create calm, planned pressure with a scheduled block."
"Being responsive is my job."	Turns every ping into an interruption.	"Being <i>reliably</i> responsive, on a predictable rhythm, is my job."

Belief	Why it hurts	A more useful replacement
"I'll focus once things calm down."	Things rarely calm down on their own.	"I build calm into my schedule on purpose."

You don't have to fully believe the replacements yet. Just notice when the old belief shows up.

What "eliminating context-switching" really means

You'll hear the goal of this course described as eliminating context-switching. In practice, nobody removes switching entirely; work involves other people, and some interruptions are legitimate. What you *can* do is remove switching from the hours that matter most, and make the rest of your switching planned rather than reactive. That's the realistic target, and it's more than enough to change how your work feels.

Action Step

Open **Worksheet 1.1: My Distraction Story** in your workbook. Write down the three situations where your focus breaks most often, the beliefs that keep you in those patterns, and what a "good focus day" would look like for you. Be specific and honest. Nobody else needs to see this page.

Lesson 1.2: The Depth Map — Sorting Your Work by Attention Demand

To protect deep work, you first need to recognize it. In this lesson you'll learn the **Depth Map**, a simple way to sort every task by how much attention it really needs and how much value it creates.

Deep work, shallow work, and noise

In *Deep Work*, Newport describes deep work as professional activity done in distraction-free concentration that pushes your thinking to its limit and creates new value that's hard to replicate. He contrasts it with shallow work: logistical, less demanding tasks that are often done while distracted and are easy to replicate.

That distinction is a useful start. For daily decisions, the Depth Map uses **four zones**, based on two questions:

1. **How much sustained concentration does this task require?** (Low or High)
2. **How much value does it create toward what matters most?** (Low or High)

	Low value	High value
High concentration	Zone 3: Traps. Demanding work that doesn't move much forward (over-polishing a slide nobody will read, rebuilding a system that already works)	Zone 1: Deep Work. Writing, designing, analyzing, planning, learning a hard skill, solving a hard problem
Low concentration	Zone 4: Noise. Unnecessary checking, low-value meetings, scrolling, "just seeing if anything came in"	Zone 2: Essential Shallow. Quick approvals, key replies, scheduling, necessary admin

What each zone needs from you

- **Zone 1, Deep Work: protect it.** This work gets your best hours, your quietest space, and your strongest boundaries. It's where most of your career value is created.
- **Zone 2, Essential Shallow: contain it.** This work matters, but it doesn't need your peak brain. Batch it into set windows (Module 7 shows you how).
- **Zone 3, Traps: question it.** These tasks feel productive because they're hard, but the effort isn't paying off. Lower the standard, delegate, or drop them.
- **Zone 4, Noise: cut it.** For most people, this is the biggest source of recovered time.

How to classify a task quickly

When you're unsure, ask:

- *"How long would it take to train a smart new graduate to do this well?"* If the answer is a few months or less, it's probably shallow. Newport uses a similar test in his book as a quick way to gauge how much expertise a task requires.
- *"Will this matter in three months?"* If not, it probably isn't high value.
- *"Could I do this well with a TV on in the background?"* If yes, it's low concentration.

The same task can move zones

Zones depend on context. Replying to an email is usually Zone 2. Writing a sensitive reply that will shape a key client relationship may be Zone 1. Reading industry news can be Zone 1 (focused research for a project) or Zone 4 (scrolling headlines). The Depth Map isn't a fixed label. It's a lens you apply each time you plan.

A worked example

Imagine Jordan, a software developer. Here's how part of his typical week sorts:

Task	Zone	Why
Designing the new data model	1	High concentration, core value
Code review for a teammate	1 or 2	Depends on complexity
Standup meeting	2	Needed, low concentration
Refactoring code that's already fine, "for cleanliness"	3	Demanding, low payoff right now
Checking team chat every 10 minutes	4	Habitual, low value
Updating ticket statuses	2	Needed admin

When Jordan maps his week, he sees that only about 6 hours are Zone 1, and they're scattered in 20-minute pieces between Zone 4 checks. That picture tells him exactly what to change.

Why this matters for the rest of the course

Every later tool uses this map. Your focus blocks are for Zone 1. Your batching windows are for Zone 2. Your elimination efforts target Zones 3 and 4. When you can tell the zones apart quickly, decisions get much easier.

Common questions

"Almost everything I do feels like Zone 2. Is that bad?" Not necessarily. Some roles, like operations, support, or reception, are shallow by design. The goal is still to find even one or two hours a week of Zone 1 work, such as improving a process or learning a skill, and to make sure your Zone 2 work is contained rather than scattered.

"What if my manager values my Zone 4 behavior, like instant replies?" Then it may not be pure noise in your context. Keep it on the map, but note it for Module 5, where you'll learn to replace instant replies with reliable, scheduled ones and check what's really expected.

"How often should I redo the map?" Once now, and again whenever your role or projects change significantly. A quick version takes ten minutes and is part of the Weekly Depth Review in Module 8.

Action Step

Go to **Worksheet 1.2: My Depth Map**. List 15–20 tasks from a typical week and place each in a zone. Then circle the three Zone 1 tasks that matter most, and star the three

Zone 4 habits that cost you the most time.

Lesson 1.3: The Focus Audit — Three Days of Honest Data

Most people guess wrong about where their time goes. They underestimate how often they check things and overestimate how much deep work they do. The **Focus Audit** replaces guesses with data.

Why three days?

One day can be unusual. A full week of detailed logging is hard to keep up. Three working days, ideally including a heavy day and a lighter one, usually give you a clear enough pattern without wearing you out.

What to track

You'll log your day in **30-minute rows**. For each row, record:

1. **Main activity:** what you mostly did.
2. **Zone:** 1, 2, 3, or 4 from the Depth Map.
3. **Switches:** a rough tally of how many times you switched tasks or checked something (email, chat, phone, a new tab).
4. **Energy:** a quick 1–5 rating of mental sharpness.
5. **Interrupter:** what broke focus, if anything: self (you chose to check), person, notification, meeting, or other.

Don't aim for perfection. A rough log completed honestly beats a perfect log you abandon by lunch. Set a gentle 30-minute timer, or fill in a few rows at each natural break.

Optional: use your devices' own data

Most phones and computers have built-in screen-time reports. Check yours at the end of each audit day and note:

- Total phone screen time
- Number of phone pickups, if your device reports it
- Your top three apps by time

These numbers often surprise people. Don't judge them. Just record them.

Analyzing your audit

After three days, total your log using the audit summary in your workbook. Look for five things:

1. **Deep hours per day.** How many 30-minute rows were truly Zone 1, meaning mostly uninterrupted? For many people the honest answer is somewhere between zero and two hours.
2. **Your peak window.** When were your energy ratings highest? That's where deep work belongs.
3. **Switch hotspots.** Which times of day had the most switches? Those are the windows to protect first.
4. **Top interrupters.** Is most interruption self-started or external? This changes your strategy. Self-interruption responds to environment and attention training (Modules 4 and 6). External interruption responds to communication norms (Module 5).
5. **Noise total.** How many hours went to Zone 4? That's your recoverable time.

A worked example

Imagine Leah, a freelance designer. Her three-day audit showed:

- Deep work: about 1.5 hours a day, mostly after 8 p.m.
- Peak energy: 9–11 a.m., which she spent on email and client chat.
- Switches: 12–20 per 30 minutes during the morning.
- Interrupters: mostly self, “just checking” the client channel.
- Noise: about 2 hours a day.

Her reset plan almost writes itself. Move deep work to 9–11 a.m., batch client messages into set windows, and tell clients the new response rhythm. She hasn't changed her talent or her workload. She has moved her best hours to her most important work.

Watch for the “audit effect”

Just tracking your attention often changes it. You might check your phone less simply because you're writing it down. That's fine, and it's your first taste of the reset. But try to log honestly, including the rough moments. The goal is an accurate starting point, not a flattering one.

What to do with the feelings that come up

Some people feel embarrassed or discouraged when they see their numbers. If that's you, remember Lesson 1.1: this is mostly the result of environment and habit, not character. A low starting point just means more room to improve. You'll repeat a short version of this audit in Module 8 to measure your progress.

Troubleshooting the audit

- **“I forgot to log for two hours.”** Fill in what you remember and mark those rows with a question mark. Don't restart the audit. Partial data is still useful.

- **“My days are all different.”** Choose your three most representative days, or log on three different weekdays across two weeks.
- **“Logging itself is distracting.”** Log at natural breaks instead of every 30 minutes, reconstructing the last hour or two. You’ll lose some detail but keep the pattern.
- **“I don’t work a standard office job.”** Adapt the rows to your life. A student might log study sessions; a parent working part-time might log only the hours set aside for work.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 1.3: The Three-Day Focus Audit**. Use the log grid for three working days, then fill in the audit summary. Finish by writing your single most important insight in one sentence.

Module 2: Elect — Choose the Work That Deserves Your Focus

Focus is limited, so it matters where you point it. In this module you'll identify your highest-leverage work, calculate a realistic depth budget, and choose a depth pattern that fits your actual life.

Lesson 2.1: Finding Your Leverage Work

Protecting focus time is pointless if you spend it on the wrong things. This lesson helps you identify your **leverage work**: the small set of deep tasks that produce most of the value in your role, your business, or your personal goals.

What makes work “high leverage”

Leverage work usually has at least three of these five traits:

1. **It compounds.** The value grows over time, like a skill, a body of work, a system, or a relationship.
2. **It's hard to replace.** It depends on your specific knowledge, judgment, or creativity.
3. **It moves a key outcome.** It directly affects the results you're measured on or care about most.
4. **It's often postponed.** It rarely feels urgent, so it keeps getting pushed back.
5. **It requires sustained concentration.** You can't do it well in five-minute pieces.

Trait 4 matters more than it seems. Leverage work tends to be important but not urgent, so it's the first thing a noisy day crowds out. That's exactly why it needs protection.

The One-Page Outcomes exercise

Here's a simple process for finding your leverage work.

Step 1: Name your arenas. List two to four areas where you want focus to pay off in the next 90 days. Examples: “my role as a product lead,” “my side business,” “exam prep,” “writing my book.”

Step 2: Define one outcome per arena. For each arena, write the single most important result you want in 90 days. Make it concrete and checkable.

- Vague: “Get better at strategy.”
- Concrete: “Present a one-year product strategy to leadership by December 15.”

Step 3: Identify the deep tasks behind each outcome. Ask: “What thinking, making, or learning has to happen for this outcome to exist?” These are your leverage tasks.

Arena	90-day outcome	Leverage (deep) tasks
Product lead	Present 1-year strategy by Dec 15	Analyze customer data; draft strategy doc; build roadmap options
Side business	Launch new offer by Nov 30	Write sales page; design offer; build onboarding flow
Personal	Finish first draft of 10 book chapters	Outline chapters; write 1,000 words per session

Step 4: Choose your “lead” project. You can’t give equal depth to everything. Pick one outcome as your lead for the next 30 days. It gets first claim on your best blocks. The others get what’s left.

Why one lead project?

Spreading deep attention across many projects often means none of them gets enough continuous time to build momentum. Remember attention residue from Lesson 1.1: switching between big projects carries a cost too. Choosing a lead project doesn’t mean ignoring everything else. It means deciding in advance who wins when time is tight.

Checking with others

If you work for someone, your leverage work should connect to what your organization values. A quick check-in helps. Here’s a script:

“I’m trying to protect focused time for the work that matters most. From your point of view, what are the one or two things I could do in the next quarter that would make the biggest difference?”

Most managers welcome this question. If their answer differs from your list, that’s valuable information, and much better to learn now than at review time.

When everything feels important

If you’re struggling to choose, try the **Regret Test**: imagine it’s 90 days from now and only one of your outcomes happened. Which one would you be most disappointed to have missed? That’s your lead.

Common mistakes

- **Choosing outcomes you don't control.** “Get promoted” depends on other people. “Deliver the analytics dashboard that leadership asked for by March” is within your control and makes promotion more likely.
- **Listing too many deep tasks.** If you have fifteen leverage tasks for one outcome, you probably haven't found the leverage yet. Look for the two or three that unlock the rest.
- **Picking the lead project by urgency.** The lead project should be the most important one, not the loudest. Urgent work will get done anyway; that's the nature of urgency.
- **Forgetting personal arenas.** Your leverage work doesn't have to be your day job. For some people, the lead project for this reset is a degree, a creative project, or a career change.

Revisit this page whenever you feel your focus blocks have drifted toward low-value work. It's the compass for everything else in the course.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 2.1: One-Page Outcomes**. Name your arenas, define one 90-day outcome for each, list the deep tasks behind them, and circle your lead project for the next 30 days.

Lesson 2.2: The Depth Budget — How Much Focus You Really Have

A common reason focus plans fail is that they're unrealistic. People schedule six hours of deep work a day, manage one, and conclude they've failed. The **Depth Budget** replaces wishful thinking with an honest number you can build on.

Deep work has a ceiling

Demanding concentration is tiring. In *Deep Work*, Newport suggests that someone new to this kind of work may manage around an hour a day, while experienced practitioners might reach around four hours. The practical takeaway is simple: plan for fewer, higher-quality hours rather than many diluted ones.

So your budget isn't “all the hours I'm at my desk.” It's the number of genuinely focused hours you can sustain at your current level of training and your current workload.

Calculating your Depth Budget

Use four inputs.

1. Your audit baseline. From Worksheet 1.3, how many truly deep hours did you average per day?

2. Your fixed commitments. Per week, how many hours go to meetings, required availability (covering a help desk, for example), caregiving, and similar things you can't move right now?

3. Your peak window. From the audit, when is your energy highest? How many hours per day does that window usually include?

4. Your training level. Be honest:

Level	Description	Starting daily target
Beginner	Rarely focus more than 20 minutes without switching	45–60 minutes
Building	Can focus 30–45 minutes, but it takes effort	60–90 minutes
Practiced	Regularly focus an hour or more	90–180 minutes
Advanced	Routinely do multiple long blocks	3–4 hours

Your starting Depth Budget = the smaller of (your training-level target) and (the peak-window time you can realistically protect).

Then add a **growth step**: plan to add about 15 minutes per day every one or two weeks, as long as you're consistently hitting your target.

A worked example

Imagine Sam, an analyst.

- Audit baseline: 40 minutes of real deep work per day.
- Fixed commitments: about 12 hours of meetings a week, mostly afternoons.
- Peak window: 8:30–11:00 a.m.
- Training level: Building.

Sam's starting budget: 75 minutes a day, at 8:45–10:00 a.m., four days a week (Wednesday has an early standing meeting). Weekly deep total: 5 hours. That's a big step

up from his current roughly 3 hours of scattered, interrupted focus, and it's realistic enough to actually happen.

Why starting small works

A small plan you keep does two things. It gets real work done, and it builds **evidence** that you're someone who focuses. Each kept block strengthens the habit and your confidence in it. A big plan you break does the opposite.

Weekly budget, not just daily

Some days will blow up. Track your budget weekly as well as daily. If Monday collapses, you can still hit your weekly target with an extra block on Thursday. This flexibility keeps one bad day from turning into "I've already failed this week."

Protecting the budget from "bonus" work

Once you have a number, treat it like a real budget. Deep hours belong to your lead project first (Lesson 2.1). If a request would eat into those hours, it has to be important enough to justify it. You'll get scripts for handling those requests in Module 5.

Common questions

"My budget is only 45 minutes. Is that even worth it?" Yes. Forty-five focused minutes a day adds up to nearly four hours a week of real progress on your lead project, which may be more than you currently get. And your budget will grow.

"What if I have no peak window I can protect?" Look for the *least bad* window, the time with the fewest interruptions, even if your energy isn't at its highest. Early morning before others start, or late afternoon after meetings end, often works.

"Should weekends count?" Only if you want them to. For many people, protecting weekends for rest makes weekday focus stronger (Lesson 7.3). If your lead project is personal, like a book or a course, a weekend block may be your best option. Just keep rest in the plan too.

"What if my workload means I can't hit even a small budget?" That's important information. Take your audit data to your manager or clients (Module 5 has scripts) and talk about what could be reduced, delayed, or shared.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 2.2: My Depth Budget**. Record your baseline, fixed commitments, peak window, and training level. Calculate your starting daily and weekly deep-work targets, and write down the date of your first growth step.

Lesson 2.3: Choosing Your Depth Pattern

You now know how much deep work to aim for. Next: how to arrange it across your week. A parent of young children, a shift worker, a startup founder, and a graduate student need different patterns. In his book, Newport describes several “depth philosophies,” ranging from near-total withdrawal to fitting focus in wherever possible, and that discussion is worth reading. Here we’ll use a practical, schedule-based set of options we call **Depth Patterns**.

The five Depth Patterns

1. The Daily Anchor. One focus block at the same time every workday (for example, 8:30–10:00 a.m.). - *Best for:* most people, especially beginners. Consistency turns it into a habit quickly. - *Watch out for:* early meetings eating into the anchor. You’ll need to defend it (Module 3).

2. The Double Anchor. Two blocks a day, often a longer morning block and a shorter afternoon one. - *Best for:* practiced focusers with some control over their schedule. - *Watch out for:* the afternoon block is often lower quality. Use it for lighter deep work, like editing or reviewing.

3. The Split Week. Some days are “deep days” with long blocks and few meetings; other days are “open days” for meetings and collaboration. - *Best for:* people who can influence their meeting schedule, like managers, consultants, and freelancers. - *Watch out for:* deep days getting invaded one meeting at a time. Name them clearly and protect them.

4. The Sprint. Regular stretches, from a few days to a couple of weeks, of intense focus on one project, alternating with normal weeks. - *Best for:* project-based work with clear deadlines, like research, writing, or a product launch. - *Watch out for:* colleagues need advance notice, and you need recovery afterward.

5. The Pocket Session. Shorter focus sessions (25–45 minutes) placed wherever time allows, often decided day by day. - *Best for:* people with unpredictable schedules, like caregivers, shift workers, and on-call roles. - *Watch out for:* this is the hardest pattern to sustain without strong rituals. Pair it with the ramp-in techniques in Lesson 3.2.

Choosing your pattern

Answer four questions:

1. **How predictable is my week?** Very predictable: Daily or Double Anchor. Somewhat: Split Week. Unpredictable: Pocket Sessions.
2. **How much control do I have over meetings?** High: Split Week works well. Low: a Daily Anchor at a time others rarely book, often early morning.

3. **How long does my deep work take to warm up?** If you need 30+ minutes to get into writing or complex analysis, favor longer blocks (Double Anchor, Split Week, Sprint).
4. **What's my training level?** Beginners: Daily Anchor or Pocket Sessions. Practiced: any pattern.

You can combine patterns. A common combination is a Daily Anchor plus a quarterly Sprint for big projects.

Example matches

Person	Situation	Pattern
Maya, team manager	Many meetings, some control	Split Week: Tuesday and Thursday mornings are deep; Monday, Wednesday, and Friday are open
Theo, nurse studying for an exam	Rotating shifts	Pocket Sessions of 30–40 minutes, planned each Sunday for the week ahead
Nadia, freelance writer	Full schedule control	Double Anchor: 8–10:30 a.m. writing, 2–3 p.m. editing
Chris, engineer	Moderate meetings	Daily Anchor 9–10:30 a.m., plus a two-week Sprint before each release

Commit for the rest of the reset

Whichever pattern you choose, commit to it for the rest of the 30 days. Changing patterns every few days keeps the habit from forming. You'll review and adjust in Module 8.

Troubleshooting your pattern

- **"My anchor time keeps getting taken."** Move it earlier, or shift to a Split Week and negotiate one or two fully protected mornings.
- **"I chose Pocket Sessions, but I never start them."** Pocket Sessions need a trigger. Try linking them to a specific event: "When the kids are on the school bus, I start a 30-minute session."
- **"My Split Week deep days keep filling up."** Block deep days on the calendar weeks in advance, and make them visible to your team with a clear label (Lesson 3.3).

- **“The Sprint sounds great, but I can’t disappear for two weeks.”** Try a mini-sprint: three consecutive mornings, cleared of meetings, focused on one project.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 2.3: My Depth Pattern**. Answer the four questions, choose your pattern (or combination), and write your default weekly layout, including the exact days and times of your focus blocks.

Module 3: Schedule — Build Focus Blocks That Actually Happen

A focus block is more than time on a calendar. In this module you'll learn the four-part anatomy of a strong block, techniques for starting when you don't feel like it, and practical ways to protect blocks on a shared calendar.

Lesson 3.1: Anatomy of a Focus Block

Many people schedule “focus time,” sit down, and then spend the first 20 minutes deciding what to do, tidying, and checking “one last thing.” By the time they begin, the block is half gone. A strong focus block has a structure. We call it the **four-part block: Enter, Target, Park, Exit.**

Part 1: Enter (2-5 minutes)

The entry ritual tells your brain that focus is starting. It should be short, the same every time, and physical where possible. Over time, repeating it becomes a cue that makes starting easier.

An entry ritual might include:

- Closing every app and tab not needed for the task.
- Putting your phone in another room or a drawer (more in Module 4).
- Setting a visible timer for the block's length.
- Filling a glass of water or making a coffee.
- Putting on the same headphones or the same instrumental playlist.
- Reading your block target out loud (see Part 2).

Keep it under five minutes. It's a doorway, not a room.

Part 2: Target (decided before the block)

Every block needs one clear target, written down **before** the block begins, ideally the day before. A good target is:

- **Singular:** one project, one outcome.
- **Concrete:** you'll know whether you did it.
- **Sized to the block:** ambitious but achievable.

Weak target	Strong target
"Work on the report"	"Draft sections 2 and 3 of the report, rough is fine"
"Study"	"Complete practice set 4 and review every wrong answer"
"Strategy"	"List 3 strategic options with 1 paragraph of pros and cons each"

If you finish the target early, you have two options: take on a clearly defined next step for the same project, or end early and rest. Don't drift into email.

Part 3: Park (throughout the block)

Distracting thoughts will come: *"I need to reply to Dana."* *"Did I pay that bill?"* *"What's that word for...?"* Instead of acting on them, **park them**.

Keep a notepad, or a single "parking lot" document, beside you. When a thought arises, write it in three to seven words and return to the work. That's all. You'll process the list after the block.

Parking works because it gives your brain a signal that the thought won't be lost. Most intrusive thoughts are your mind trying not to forget something. Once the thought is captured, the pull usually fades.

Rule for looking things up: if you need a fact to continue, write "LOOK UP: X" in the parking lot and use a placeholder (like "[number]") in your work. Opening a browser during a block is one of the most common ways focus gets lost.

Part 4: Exit (3-5 minutes)

Most people end a block by jumping straight into email. A deliberate exit protects the next block and gives your brain a sense of completion. At the end of each block:

1. **Write a "next move" note.** One or two sentences on exactly where to restart next time: *"Next: write the counterargument paragraph in section 3, using the Q2 data."* This makes your next entry much faster.
2. **Log the block.** Record the time and a quick 1-5 rating for focus quality in your tracker.
3. **Process the parking lot.** Move items to your task list, or handle quick ones in your next shallow window.

Block length

Match the block to your training level (Lesson 2.2) and the type of work:

- **Beginners:** 30–45 minutes, possibly with a 5-minute break and a second round.
- **Building:** 60–90 minutes.
- **Practiced:** 90–120 minutes, with a short movement break around the middle if needed.

Longer isn't automatically better. A focused 60-minute block beats a scattered 3-hour one.

A sample block

Imagine Rosa, a grant writer, running a 75-minute block:

- **8:30 Enter:** phone in hallway drawer, close email, timer set to 70 minutes, reads target aloud: "Draft the Needs Statement, 600 words, rough."
- **8:34–9:40 Work:** parks four thoughts, including "LOOK UP: 2023 county numbers."
- **9:40 Exit:** next-move note ("Tighten para 2; insert county numbers; start Methods outline"), rates focus 4/5, moves parking-lot items to her task list.

Troubleshooting blocks

- **"I finish the block and realize I worked on the wrong thing."** Your target was probably too vague. Write targets that describe a visible result: a draft, a list, a finished set of problems.
- **"My parking lot fills up with 20 items."** That's fine, and common in the first weeks. It usually shrinks as your processing windows (Module 5) make you more confident that nothing is being missed.
- **"I keep extending blocks and then crash."** Stick to the planned length for now. Ending while you still have energy, with a clear next-move note, makes the next block easier to start.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 3.1: My Four-Part Block**. Design your entry ritual, write targets for your next three blocks, set up your parking lot, and write your exit checklist. Then run one full block and rate it.

Lesson 3.2: The Ramp-In — Starting When You Don't Feel Like It

You've scheduled the block, you're at your desk, and... you don't want to start. The work feels heavy, vague, or intimidating. This moment, the gap between sitting down and

actually beginning, is where many focus plans fall apart. This lesson gives you five **ramp-in techniques** for crossing it.

Why starting is the hardest part

Deep work often involves uncertainty: you don't yet know what the answer, the design, or the argument will be. The brain tends to avoid that kind of ambiguity and looks for something clearer and easier, like email, which always has a clear next action. The resistance you feel isn't a sign that you're lazy or that the work is wrong. It's a predictable reaction to a hard, unclear task.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, known for his research on "flow," found that people tend to become absorbed in activities where the challenge is well matched to their skill and the goals are clear. Most ramp-in techniques work by making the goal clearer or the first step more manageable.

Technique 1: The Two-Minute Opening

Commit only to working for two minutes. Tell yourself you can stop after that if you want. Once you've started, continuing is usually much easier than starting was. If you truly still want to stop after two minutes, take a short break and try again. But most of the time, you'll keep going.

Technique 2: The First Ugly Version

Give yourself explicit permission to make the first attempt bad. Write a messy paragraph, sketch a crude diagram, list half-formed ideas. Label the file "ROUGH." Perfectionism is a major cause of delay in starting. Lowering the bar for the first pass gets the work moving, and you can always improve it in a later block.

Technique 3: The Smallest Visible Step

When a task feels too big, shrink the first step until it's almost silly:

- Not "write the chapter," but "write the chapter's first sentence."
- Not "analyze the data," but "open the spreadsheet and list the column names."
- Not "plan the strategy," but "write the question the strategy must answer."

Your next-move note from the previous block (Lesson 3.1) is often this step, which is one reason the exit note matters so much.

Technique 4: Question Mode

Instead of trying to produce an answer, start by writing questions. *"What is this section actually trying to prove? What would a skeptic ask? What do I already know? What's*

missing?” Questions are easier to generate than answers, and they often lead straight into the work.

Technique 5: The Warm-Up Task

Start with 5–10 minutes of a related but lighter task: re-read your notes, review yesterday’s draft, or edit one paragraph. This loads the context into your mind. Keep it strictly related to the project, and set a firm limit so the warm-up doesn’t become the whole block.

Choosing the right technique

If the resistance feels like...	Try...
“I just don’t feel like it.”	Two-Minute Opening
“It has to be good.”	First Ugly Version
“It’s too big.”	Smallest Visible Step
“I don’t know where to start.”	Question Mode
“I’ve lost the thread.”	Warm-Up Task

The Starting Script

Some people find it helpful to use a short script at the start of every block, combining several techniques. Try saying or writing:

“For the next [X] minutes, I’m working only on [target]. The first step is [smallest step]. It’s allowed to be rough. I’ll park every distraction.”

It takes 20 seconds and often makes the difference.

When resistance is a signal

Sometimes strong, repeated resistance means something real: the target is unclear, the project lacks information you need, or you’re deeply tired. If you use these techniques and still can’t start three blocks in a row on the same project, pause and ask: “*What’s actually missing?*” The answer might be a conversation, a decision from someone else, or rest. Chronic exhaustion or a persistent inability to start anything may be worth discussing with a healthcare professional.

Building a starting habit

Starting gets easier with repetition. When you begin at the same time, in the same place, with the same entry ritual, starting slowly becomes less of a decision and more of a routine. For the next two weeks, don't judge your blocks by how much you produce. Judge them by one question: *did I start on time?* Once starting is reliable, output follows.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 3.2: My Ramp-In Toolkit**. Identify your most common type of resistance, choose your go-to techniques, and write your personal Starting Script. Use it at the start of your next three blocks and note what happened.

Lesson 3.3: Protecting Blocks on Your Calendar

A block that exists only in your head will lose to any meeting invitation. This lesson shows you how to make focus blocks visible, respected, and hard to schedule over, without damaging your working relationships.

Rule 1: Put blocks on the calendar as real events

Create recurring calendar events for every block in your Depth Pattern (Lesson 2.3). Treat them like appointments with a client. Some tips:

- **Name them clearly but neutrally.** "Focus: Q4 Strategy" or "Deep Work — booked" tells people it's a real commitment. Some people prefer "Project work — unavailable."
- **Mark yourself as busy**, not free.
- **Schedule them weeks ahead.** Blocks placed two to four weeks in advance are much harder for others to book over than blocks added the morning of.
- **Use your calendar's focus-time features if it has them.** Some tools can automatically decline meetings during focus time. Use them if your workplace culture allows.

Rule 2: Plan the week before it starts

Choose a regular weekly planning time, like Friday afternoon or Sunday evening, to:

1. Confirm next week's focus blocks.
2. Assign a target to each block (Lesson 3.1).
3. Check for conflicts and move blocks, rather than deleting them, when needed.

This takes 15–20 minutes and prevents most "the week got away from me" problems.

Rule 3: Move, don't delete

Things will come up. When a real conflict appears, the rule is: **a block can be moved, but not deleted**. Find the next best slot in the same week and move it there. This keeps your weekly Depth Budget intact and reinforces the message to yourself that focus time is non-negotiable in total, even if it's flexible in timing.

Rule 4: Decide your “block-breakers” in advance

Decide ahead of time what counts as a valid reason to interrupt a block. For example:

- A true emergency (safety, health, a critical system down).
- A direct request from your manager marked urgent.
- A time-sensitive client issue with real consequences.

Everything else waits until the block ends. Having this list prevents you from deciding in the moment, when every interruption feels urgent.

Scripts for handling meeting requests

When someone asks to meet during a block:

“I’ve got focused project time then, but I could do [alternative time 1] or [alternative time 2]. Would either work?”

When someone asks why you’re unavailable:

“I’m blocking time to get [project] done well. I’m fully available [open windows], and if something’s truly urgent, [how to reach you].”

When your manager schedules over a block:

“I noticed the new meeting lands on my focus time for [project]. I can make it work, but could we try [alternative] so I can keep that project on track? If this time is best, no problem, I’ll move my block.”

These scripts do three things: they show the block is for real work, they offer alternatives, and they leave room for real priorities. Most people respond well to this.

Making blocks visible in person

If you work in a shared space:

- Use a simple visual signal: headphones, a small desk sign (“Focusing until 10:30, back soon”), or a status light.
- Tell nearby colleagues about your blocks: *“I’m trying something new: I’m doing heads-down work 9–10:30 most mornings. If it’s not urgent, could you catch me after?”*
- Set your chat status to reflect it, with the time you’ll be back.

At home, the same idea applies to family members or housemates. A clear, agreed signal (“door closed means focus time until 10”) helps a lot, especially paired with a clear end time.

Imagine this in practice

Imagine Andre, a project coordinator. He used to accept every meeting invitation automatically. He sets up recurring “Focus: Client Proposals” blocks on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, three weeks in advance, marked busy. When a colleague requests a Tuesday 9:30 meeting, he offers 1 p.m. or Wednesday morning. They choose Wednesday. When his manager asks for a Thursday morning meeting, he mentions the block, and when she explains the meeting is time-sensitive, he moves his block to Friday. Protection with flexibility.

When you don’t control your calendar

Some people, like assistants, clinicians, and support staff, have schedules set by others. If that’s you:

- Ask for **one** recurring protected block per week to start. A small, specific request is easier to approve.
- Use the least-booked times: first thing in the morning, or the last hour of the day.
- Protect “micro-blocks” of 25–30 minutes between fixed commitments, and use them with Pocket Session rituals (Lesson 2.3).

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 3.3: Calendar Protection Plan**. Schedule your recurring blocks for the next four weeks, choose your weekly planning time, list your block-breakers, and personalize the three scripts in your own words.

Module 4: Shield (Part 1) — Engineer Your Environment

Willpower is unreliable, especially when you're tired. Environment works all the time. This module is your Environment Design Guide: you'll use the Friction Ladder to make distraction harder and focus easier, reset your digital devices, and set up physical spaces that cue concentration. The workbook gathers all three into a one-page Environment Design Guide summary you can keep by your desk.

Lesson 4.1: The Friction Ladder

Every distraction has a “distance,” meaning how much effort it takes to reach. When your phone is in your hand, the distance is almost zero. When it's in another room, switched off, the distance is much greater. Small increases in effort can make a big difference in behavior. The **Friction Ladder** is a way to deliberately add distance between you and your top distractions.

The five rungs

Each rung adds more friction than the one before.

Rung	Name	What it means	Example
1	Hide	Remove the visible cue	Close the email tab; move social apps off your home screen
2	Delay	Add steps or waiting before access	Log out of social sites; require a password each time
3	Distance	Put physical space between you and the distraction	Phone in another room during blocks
4	Lock	Use tools to block access for a set time	Website or app blockers on a schedule
5	Remove	Take it out of your life, or your work device	Delete the app; unsubscribe; remove work email from personal phone

How to use the ladder

1. **List your top five distractions** from your attention audit (Worksheet 1.3).
2. **For each, choose a starting rung.** Start with the lowest rung you think will actually work, not the most dramatic.
3. **Climb when needed.** If you still reach the distraction regularly after a week, move up one rung.

The ladder respects the fact that some distractions are also useful. You probably can't delete email (Rung 5), but you can close it during blocks (Rung 1) and schedule a blocker (Rung 4) during your deepest sessions.

Reverse the ladder for focus

The same principle works in reverse: **remove friction from deep work.** Make it as easy as possible to start focusing:

- Leave the project file open at the end of the day, ready to go (paired with your next-move note).
- Keep materials you need (notes, books, references) in one place.
- Create a bookmark or shortcut that opens everything the project needs with one click.
- Keep a "focus kit" ready: headphones, notebook, water bottle.

When distraction is harder and focus is easier, you don't need as much willpower.

A note on blocking tools

Many apps and browser extensions can block websites or apps on a schedule. We won't recommend specific products, since tools change often, but look for these features:

- Scheduled blocking that starts automatically at your block times.
- A "locked" mode that's hard to override mid-session.
- Allow-lists, so you can keep access to what you need (like a research database).
- Cross-device syncing if you're distracted on multiple devices.

Blocking tools are Rung 4. They're powerful, but don't start there unless lower rungs have failed. People who start with heavy restrictions sometimes rebel against them and uninstall everything.

Watch for "distraction substitution"

When you block your top distraction, your brain may look for a replacement: news instead of social media, or reorganizing files instead of email. This is normal. Add the new

distraction to your list and place it on the ladder. After a few rounds, the substitutions usually run out, and you're left with the work.

Imagine this in practice

Imagine Kai, a graduate student. His top distractions: phone messages, a video site, news, email, and a sports forum. His ladder plan:

- **Phone:** Rung 3, in his backpack in the hallway during blocks.
- **Video site:** Rung 4, blocked 9 a.m.–1 p.m. on weekdays.
- **News:** Rung 2, logged out, bookmark deleted.
- **Email:** Rung 1, closed during blocks, checked at 11 and 3.
- **Sports forum:** Rung 5, account deleted after realizing it cost him an hour a day.

A week later, he notices he's reorganizing his notes app during blocks, so he adds it to the list at Rung 1.

Troubleshooting the ladder

- **"I keep disabling my blocker."** Move the off switch further away: use a setting that can't be changed mid-session, or ask someone you trust to set the password.
- **"My distraction is also my work tool."** Split the tool. Use a separate browser profile, a separate account, or a work-only device where possible, so the useful version doesn't carry the distracting version with it.
- **"Adding friction feels extreme."** Start on Rung 1 for everything. Most people are surprised by how much a small change, like closing a tab, helps.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 4.1: My Friction Ladder**. List your top five distractions, assign each a starting rung with a specific action, and list three ways to reduce friction for your deep work. Set a date one week from now to review and climb where needed.

Lesson 4.2: The Digital Reset — Phone, Notifications, and Screens

For most people, the phone and the computer are where distraction lives. This lesson walks you through a **Digital Reset**: a one-time, roughly one-hour setup that changes how your devices treat your attention.

Why the phone deserves special attention

In a 2017 study, Adrian Ward and colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin found that participants performed worse on some cognitive tasks when their phone was on the desk,

even face down and silent, compared with when it was in another room. Later research has had mixed results in trying to replicate this effect, so treat it as suggestive, not settled. But it matches what many people experience: a phone within reach tends to pull at your attention. The practical conclusion is simple and low-cost: during focus blocks, put the phone out of sight and out of reach.

Step 1: The notification purge (20 minutes)

Go through every app on your phone and computer and ask: *“Does this app need to interrupt me in real time?”*

Use three categories:

- **Allow:** People who might have a real emergency (calls from family, for example), calendar reminders, and anything safety-related.
- **Silent:** Messages and apps you want to check, but on your own schedule. Turn off sound, vibration, banners, and badges.
- **Off:** Everything else: promotional notifications, social media, news alerts, games, shopping.

For most people, only a handful of apps end up in “Allow.” That’s the goal.

Step 2: Home screen redesign (10 minutes)

Your phone’s home screen is a menu of cues. Redesign it:

- Keep only tools on the first screen: calendar, maps, notes, camera, phone.
- Move social media, news, video, and email into a folder on a later screen, or remove them from the home screen entirely.
- Consider switching your phone to grayscale during work hours. Many people find it makes the phone less appealing.

Step 3: Focus modes (10 minutes)

Most phones and computers now have focus or do-not-disturb modes. Set up a **Deep Work mode** that:

- Silences everything except your chosen emergency contacts.
- Hides badges.
- Turns on automatically during your scheduled blocks, if your device supports scheduling.

Also consider a **Wind-Down mode** for evenings that limits work apps after a set time.

Step 4: Computer cleanup (15 minutes)

- **Close by default.** Email and chat shouldn't stay open all day. Open them during shallow windows.
- **Browser:** remove distracting bookmarks from the toolbar, and consider a separate browser profile just for focus work, with only the bookmarks you need.
- **Desktop:** clear it. A desktop full of files is a wall of reminders.
- **Tabs:** end each day by closing every tab not needed for tomorrow's first block.

Step 5: Decide your checking rhythm

Instead of checking whenever you feel the urge, choose set times. For example: email at 11 a.m., 2 p.m., and 4:30 p.m.; messages at lunch and after work. We'll build this further in Module 5, and a 2015 study by Kostadin Kushlev and Elizabeth Dunn supports the approach: participants who were asked to check email only three times a day reported lower daily stress than when they checked as often as they liked.

The “phone parking” habit

Choose a specific phone parking spot, like a drawer, a shelf in another room, or a bag by the door, and put your phone there at the start of every block. Make it part of your entry ritual (Lesson 3.1). If you need to be reachable for emergencies, set your emergency contacts to break through your focus mode, and keep the phone in the next room with sound on for those contacts only.

What if my job requires my phone?

Some roles need real-time reachability. In that case, use a “**narrow channel**” approach: decide the one channel for urgent contact (calls from specific people, for example), let only that through, and silence everything else. Tell the relevant people: “If it's urgent during my focus time, call me. Messages will be answered by [time].”

Keeping the reset from creeping back

Devices drift. Apps add new notification types in updates, and new apps arrive with alerts switched on. Put a 10-minute **notification check** in your monthly calendar: scan for anything that's started buzzing, and move it back to Silent or Off. You'll also redo a quick version of this reset as part of the Reset Day protocol in Lesson 8.2.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 4.2: Digital Reset Checklist**. Work through the notification purge, home screen redesign, focus modes, computer cleanup, and checking rhythm. Check off each item and record your before-and-after daily notification estimate.

Lesson 4.3: Designing Physical Spaces That Cue Focus

Your surroundings send constant signals to your brain about what kind of activity happens here. If your desk is where you answer email, scroll, eat lunch, and pay bills, it doesn't signal "deep focus." This lesson helps you create physical cues that make concentration more automatic.

The principle: one place, one mode

Habits are closely tied to context. When you repeatedly do the same thing in the same place, the place itself begins to cue the behavior. You can use this deliberately by creating a **focus place**: a specific spot where you do deep work and, as much as possible, nothing else.

It doesn't have to be a separate room. It might be:

- A particular chair at the kitchen table, used only for focus blocks.
- One side of your desk, cleared, with a specific lamp you switch on only for deep work.
- A library carrel or a quiet café you visit for writing sessions.
- A spot in the office you book for heads-down work.

What matters is consistency and a clear mental boundary between "this is where I focus" and "this is where I do everything else."

Five elements of a focus space

1. Clear surfaces. Only materials for the current target. Put everything else in a box or drawer during blocks. Visual clutter competes for attention.

2. Sound. People differ here. Some focus best in silence; others prefer steady background noise or instrumental music. Experiment and choose one "focus sound" you use consistently. Music with lyrics in a language you understand tends to be more distracting for language-heavy tasks like writing and reading, so try instrumental options first. Noise-canceling headphones can double as a "do not disturb" signal.

3. Light. Choose good lighting, natural if possible. A dedicated "focus lamp" you turn on only for blocks can become a strong entry cue.

4. Comfort without drowsiness. A comfortable chair and a reasonable temperature help. Very cozy spots, like your bed or the couch, tend to cue rest, not focus.

5. A single signal object. Choose one object that appears only during focus: a specific notebook, a candle, a particular mug. Put it out during your entry ritual and away during your exit. It's a small, physical "on/off switch."

When you share space

At home with family, housemates, or kids:

- **Agree on a signal.** A closed door, a sign, or headphones. Explain it clearly and agree on the exceptions: “Knock only if someone’s hurt or something is broken.”
- **Set clear end times.** People respect boundaries more when they know when you’ll be available: “I’m focusing until 10:30, then I’m all yours.”
- **Match blocks to quieter times.** Early mornings, nap times, or school hours may be your best windows.

In an open-plan office:

- Book quiet rooms or phone booths for blocks when available.
- Use headphones and a visible status.
- Ask whether your team can agree on “quiet hours,” for example 9–11 a.m. with no casual interruptions. (Module 5 has scripts.)

Changing location as a reset

When a block has gone badly or you feel stuck, a change of location can help. Some people keep a “second focus place,” like a library or a different room, for especially important sessions. The novelty of a new setting, combined with the effort of getting there, can make the time feel more committed.

Remote and hybrid workers

If you work from home, your home now contains all your distractions: chores, snacks, laundry, family. A few adjustments help:

- **Dress for work**, even casually. It signals a mode change.
- **Create a “commute.”** A short walk before and after work can mark the start and end of the workday.
- **Don’t work in bed.** Protecting the bedroom for rest helps your sleep as well as your focus.

Common questions

“I don’t have a separate space at all.” Use time and objects instead of rooms. Same seat, same lamp, same headphones, and the same entry ritual at the same time each day can create a strong enough cue.

“Does working in a café help or hurt?” It depends on you. Some people find moderate background activity helps them focus, especially for writing. Others find it distracting. Test it with two or three blocks and compare your focus ratings.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 4.3: Focus Space Design**. Choose your primary and backup focus places, design the five elements for each, choose your signal object, and write down the agreements you'll make with people you share space with. Then fill in the **Environment Design Guide: One-Page Summary** that follows it, pulling together your Friction Ladder, Digital Reset, and focus-space decisions.

Module 5: Shield (Part 2) — Tame Communication and Meetings

For many people, the biggest threat to focus isn't their phone. It's other people's expectations. In this module you'll set response-time norms, batch your communication, use respectful scripts for bosses, teams, and clients, and cut meeting load without burning bridges.

Lesson 5.1: Response-Time Norms and Communication Batching

Much of the pressure to check constantly comes from an unspoken assumption: *everyone expects an immediate reply*. Often, that assumption is only partly true. This lesson helps you find out what's actually expected, set a sustainable rhythm, and batch your communication so it stops fragmenting your day.

The “instant reply” myth

Ask yourself honestly: when did someone last have a real problem because you took two hours to answer an email? For most roles, the answer is “rarely” or “never.” Yet many people behave as if every message is urgent. That habit is expensive. Every check can leave attention residue (Lesson 1.1) that follows you back into your work.

Responsiveness does matter. The shift is from **instant** responsiveness to **reliable** responsiveness: people know when they'll hear back from you, and you consistently deliver on that.

Step 1: Map real expectations by channel

Different channels carry different expectations. List each channel you use and write down the response time that's actually needed, not the one you've been giving.

Channel	Current habit	Actually needed	New norm
Work email	Within 5 minutes	Same business day	Within 4 working hours
Team chat	Within 1 minute	Within 1–2 hours for most things	Checked at set windows
Client portal	Constantly open	Within 1 business day	Twice daily

Channel	Current habit	Actually needed	New norm
Phone call	Immediately	Immediately (urgent only)	Reserved for urgent matters
Personal messages	Throughout the day	Evenings are fine	Lunch and after work

If you're not sure what's needed, ask (see Lesson 5.2 for scripts). You'll often find people expect much less than you assumed.

Step 2: Set your processing windows

Choose specific times to process communication. Two to four windows a day works for most people. For example:

- **11:00 a.m.** after your morning focus block
- **2:00 p.m.** after lunch
- **4:30 p.m.** before your shutdown ritual

The 2015 study by Kostadin Kushlev and Elizabeth Dunn mentioned in Module 4 supports this approach: participants reported lower daily stress during the week they limited email checking to three times a day. Your exact number depends on your role, but fewer, deliberate windows usually beat constant grazing.

Step 3: Process, don't just check

"Checking" means looking at messages and closing them again, often without acting. It creates anxiety without progress. **Processing** means handling each message once, with a decision. Use the **4D sort** during each window:

1. **Do:** if it takes under two minutes, reply or act now.
2. **Defer:** if it needs more time, add it to your task list with a date, then archive the message.
3. **Delegate:** if someone else should handle it, forward it with a clear note.
4. **Delete (or archive):** if no action is needed, remove it from your inbox.

The goal is to leave each window with an inbox that contains nothing unprocessed. It doesn't have to be empty, but everything in it should have a decision.

Step 4: Reduce incoming volume

Less in means less to process:

- **Unsubscribe ruthlessly** from newsletters and promotions you don't read.
- **Leave or mute chat channels** that aren't relevant to your work.

- **Write clearer messages.** Vague emails create back-and-forth. End requests with a clear question and a deadline: “Could you confirm by Thursday whether option A or B works?”
- **Use templates** for replies you send often.
- **Turn off “reply all” habits** in your team where possible.

Step 5: Build an urgent lane

People worry: “But what if something urgent comes in?” Solve it directly by creating one clear **urgent lane**, usually a phone call or a specific message keyword. Tell people: “If it’s genuinely urgent, call me. Otherwise I check messages at 11, 2, and 4:30.” This lets you close everything else with confidence.

Handling the first-week wobble

When you first stop checking constantly, you may feel uneasy, as if you’re missing something. That feeling usually fades over the first week or two as you see that nothing bad happens. Notice it, let it pass, and trust your windows. If something truly did go wrong because of a delayed reply, adjust that specific channel’s norm rather than abandoning the whole system.

Imagine this in practice

Imagine Elena, an HR generalist who used to have email open all day. She maps her channels and realizes only phone calls from the leadership team truly need an instant answer. She sets windows at 10:30, 1:30, and 4:00, tells her team about the urgent lane, and unsubscribes from 30 newsletters. Her first week feels uncomfortable. By week three, she’s getting through her inbox faster in three windows than she used to in a scattered full day, and she has a protected 8:30–10:15 block for policy writing.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 5.1: My Communication Rhythm**. Fill in the channel map with current habits, actual needs, and new norms. Choose your processing windows, define your urgent lane, and list five sources of incoming volume you’ll cut this week.

Lesson 5.2: Scripts for Bosses, Teams, and Clients

Knowing your new rhythm is one thing. Telling other people about it is another. Many people avoid these conversations because they fear looking lazy, difficult, or uncommitted. This lesson gives you tested structures and scripts for introducing focus boundaries in a way that builds trust.

The core principle: frame focus as a benefit to them

People rarely object to your focus. They object to feeling ignored or uncertain. So every conversation about boundaries should cover three things:

1. **Why:** the outcome it serves (better work on something they care about).
2. **When:** exactly when you'll be available and how quickly you'll respond.
3. **What if:** how to reach you in a genuine emergency.

Leave out any of these, and people may fill in the blanks with worries.

Script 1: Talking to your manager

Choose a calm moment, not the middle of a crisis. Frame it as an experiment, which feels lower-risk to both of you.

"I want to make faster progress on [lead project]. I'd like to try something for the next month: blocking [time] on [days] for focused work on it. During those blocks I'll check messages right after, at [time]. If something's truly urgent, you can call me and I'll pick up. Can we try it for four weeks and then check in on how it's working?"

If your manager hesitates, ask what worries them:

"What would make you comfortable with this? Is there a particular kind of request you'd need me to answer quickly?"

Then build that exception into your urgent lane. Most concerns are specific and solvable.

Script 2: Talking to your team

For peers and direct reports, clarity and fairness matter:

"Quick heads-up: I'm going to be heads-down on [project] most mornings until [time]. I'll be checking chat at [times], so you'll always hear back from me by then. If something's on fire, call me. And if focus time would help any of you too, I'm happy to support that."

That last line matters. Offering the same protection to others turns your boundary into a shared norm rather than a personal privilege.

Script 3: Proposing a team focus norm

If your team struggles with constant interruptions, suggest a group agreement:

“I’ve noticed we’re all getting pulled in a lot of directions. What if we tried ‘quiet mornings’ two days a week, say Tuesday and Thursday until 11, with no meetings and no non-urgent pings? We could try it for a month and see what we notice.”

Specific, time-limited, and reversible proposals are much easier for a group to accept.

Script 4: Setting expectations with clients

Clients often respond well to clear communication because it signals professionalism. Put it in your onboarding materials, email signature, or project kickoff:

“How we’ll communicate: I reply to emails within one business day, usually sooner. I do focused work on client projects in the mornings, so replies typically go out in the afternoon. For anything urgent, like a site outage, call [number].”

Short email signature version:

“I check email at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. on weekdays. For urgent matters, please call.”

Script 5: Declining or delaying a request

When someone asks for something that would eat into your focus time:

“I’d like to help with that. I’m committed to [project] this morning, but I can get to it by [time]. Does that work?”

If it’s something you shouldn’t take on at all:

“I don’t have capacity for that right now without delaying [project]. Could [alternative person or resource] help, or can we revisit it next [week/month]?”

Script 6: Resetting after you've been “always on”

If you've trained people to expect instant replies, acknowledge the change directly:

“You might notice I’m replying a bit less instantly from now on. It’s not that I’m less available. I’m protecting time for focused work so I can do a better job on [project]. You’ll always hear from me by [time], and for anything urgent, call me.”

Handling pushback

If someone pushes back:

- **Listen for the underlying need.** “You need to know that X gets handled by Friday? Let’s make sure that happens.”
- **Offer a trade.** “I can’t be instantly reachable all morning, but I can check in at 10 on days when this project is live.”
- **Keep your promise.** Consistently replying within the time you promised is the best argument for your new system.

A note on power and culture

These scripts assume a reasonably healthy workplace. Some roles and cultures genuinely require high availability, and your ability to set boundaries varies with your position. If your options are limited, start with what you control: smaller blocks, earlier times, fewer self-started checks. Even small protected windows add up.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 5.2: My Boundary Scripts**. Choose the three scripts you need most, rewrite each in your own words for a real person in your life, and plan when you’ll have each conversation this week.

Lesson 5.3: Meeting Triage

Meetings can be valuable, but too many, poorly placed, or poorly run meetings can wipe out deep work. A single meeting in the middle of the morning can split a potential two-hour block into two short pieces too small for real focus. This lesson shows you how to reduce, reshape, and reposition meetings.

The Meeting Triage questions

For each recurring meeting on your calendar, run through these five questions:

1. **Does this meeting have a clear purpose and a decision or outcome?** If not, it may be a status update that could be written.
2. **Do I need to be there?** Could I contribute in advance, send a delegate, or read the notes afterward?
3. **Could it be shorter?** Could a 60-minute meeting become 30, or a 30 become 15?
4. **Could it be less frequent?** Weekly to biweekly? Daily to three times a week?
5. **Is it in the right place in my day?** Is it breaking up my peak focus window?

Label each meeting:

Label	Meaning	Action
Keep	Valuable as is	No change
Trim	Valuable, but too long or too frequent	Propose a shorter or less frequent version
Move	Valuable, but badly placed	Propose a new time outside your focus window
Replace	The purpose could be served another way	Suggest a written update, shared document, or recorded message
Exit	You don't need to be there	Ask to be removed, or send input in advance

Scripts for meeting changes

Declining a recurring meeting:

"I've been reviewing my calendar to protect time for [project]. I don't think I'm adding much to this meeting right now. Would it be okay if I dropped off and read the notes instead? I'm happy to send any input in advance."

Proposing a written update:

"Would it work to try a written update for this one? Everyone could add their status to a shared doc by Monday noon, and we'd only meet if something needs discussion."

Shortening a meeting:

“What if we tried 25 minutes instead of an hour for the next few weeks, with a clear agenda sent the day before? If we need more time, we can always go back.”

Moving a meeting:

“Could we move this to the afternoon? Mornings are when I do my focused work on [project], and afternoons are much easier for me to be fully present.”

Cluster your meetings

When you can influence scheduling, **cluster meetings together** instead of spreading them out. Three back-to-back meetings from 1 to 3 p.m. cost much less focus than three meetings at 9:30, 11:30, and 2:30, which leave only short gaps. If you use the Split Week pattern (Lesson 2.3), push as many meetings as possible into your open days.

Consider setting up “office hours,” a recurring window when people know they can book time with you. It gives people easy access while keeping your deep time protected.

Make the meetings you keep better

Better meetings are often shorter and less frequent. When you run or influence a meeting:

- **Send an agenda in advance** with the decision needed.
- **Start and end on time.**
- **End with clear next steps:** who does what by when.
- **Share notes afterward** so people who didn’t attend can stay informed.

Protect the “edges”

Even a short meeting has hidden costs: preparing beforehand, and the switching cost afterward. Leave a 5–10 minute buffer after meetings when you can, and don’t schedule a focus block starting the same minute a meeting ends. Use that buffer to capture notes and next steps, so the meeting doesn’t follow you into your next block.

Imagine this in practice

Imagine Omar, a team lead with 22 hours of meetings a week. After triage: two meetings are replaced with written updates, three are trimmed from 60 to 30 minutes, one weekly meeting becomes biweekly, he exits two where he’s rarely needed, and he moves his one-on-ones into Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. His meeting load drops to about 13 hours a week, and he gains three protected morning blocks.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 5.3: Meeting Triage**. List every recurring meeting, run it through the five questions, and label it Keep, Trim, Move, Replace, or Exit. Pick the three changes with the biggest focus payoff and write down who you'll talk to and when.

Module 6: Shield (Part 3) — Train Your Attention

Some distraction comes from inside. Even in a perfect environment, your mind will want to wander, check, and escape hard work. In this module you'll learn to ride out the urge to switch, build your concentration gradually with structured practice, and manage your energy so focus is easier to sustain.

Lesson 6.1: Urge Surfing — Riding Out the Pull to Switch

You're writing. It gets hard. Suddenly you feel a strong urge to check your email, grab a snack, or look up something unrelated. Before you know it, you're three tabs away from your work. This lesson teaches you a skill for these moments: noticing the urge, riding it out, and returning.

Why hard work triggers escape

When a task becomes difficult, uncertain, or boring, it's common to feel a small wave of discomfort. Your brain looks for relief, and distractions offer instant relief: novelty, a quick sense of completion, or social contact. The urge to switch often isn't really about the distraction. It's about escaping the discomfort of the hard moment.

If you give in every time, you train your brain that discomfort leads to escape. Over time, the threshold for switching drops lower and lower. The good news: the reverse also works. Each time you notice an urge and return to the work, you practice staying.

Urge surfing

Urge surfing is a technique developed by psychologist G. Alan Marlatt as part of his relapse prevention work. The idea: urges are like waves. They rise, peak, and fall. If you don't act on them, they usually pass on their own, often within a few minutes. Instead of fighting the urge or giving in, you observe it and ride it out.

We've adapted it here for focus work. When you feel the pull to switch:

1. **Notice.** Name it silently: "There's the urge to check email."
2. **Locate.** Notice where you feel it: restlessness in your hands, tension in your chest, a pull in your attention.
3. **Breathe.** Take three slow breaths while you watch the urge, without acting on it.
4. **Label the discomfort.** Ask: "What's hard right now?" Often the answer is useful: "I don't know what to write next," or "This section is boring."

5. **Return with a tiny step.** Go back to the work with the smallest possible next action (Lesson 3.2).

The whole process takes about 30 to 60 seconds. You're not trying to eliminate the urge. You're practicing not obeying it.

The Urge Tally

For the next week, keep a tally of urges during your focus blocks. Each time you notice one and surf it, make a mark. Each time you give in, make a different mark. You'll likely see two patterns:

- The number of urges often **drops** over time as your brain learns that switching isn't on offer.
- Your ratio of "surfed" to "gave in" **improves** with practice.

This tally also turns the practice into a game, which makes it more motivating.

Distraction delay

A useful companion to urge surfing is the **15-minute delay**. When you want to check something, tell yourself: "I can check it in 15 minutes if I still want to." Write it in your parking lot. Very often, 15 minutes later, the urge is gone or the block is over. This works because you're not saying "never," which can trigger resistance. You're saying "not yet."

Know your high-risk moments

Urges tend to cluster at predictable points:

- **The first 10 minutes** of a block, before you're warmed up.
- **Transitions** within the task, like finishing one section and starting the next.
- **Stuck points**, when you don't know what to do next.
- **Low-energy times**, like the mid-afternoon dip.

Plan for them. At the start of a block, use your ramp-in. At transitions, write your next move before you finish the current section. At stuck points, switch to Question Mode (Lesson 3.2).

A note on emotional distress

Urge surfing is a skill for everyday discomfort, the ordinary resistance of hard work. It isn't a treatment for anxiety, compulsive behaviors, or strong emotional distress. If you find you can't stop checking or scrolling despite real effort, or if the urges come with significant anxiety or low mood, that's a good reason to talk to a doctor or mental health professional.

Imagine this in practice

Imagine Ben, a law student. During his 60-minute study blocks, he notices about 15 urges to check his phone in the first week and gives in to about half. By week three, he's noticing around 6 urges and surfing almost all of them. He finds most urges come when he hits a difficult case, so he starts writing "What's the key question in this case?" whenever he feels stuck.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 6.1: Urge Surfing Log**. Practice the five-step surf during every focus block for one week. Use the tally table to track urges surfed and urges acted on, and note your highest-risk moments.

Lesson 6.2: Attention Reps — Building Concentration Like a Muscle

Concentration isn't only something you have or don't have. It improves with practice, a bit like fitness. If you've spent years switching every few minutes, jumping straight into three-hour blocks is like trying to run a marathon without training. This lesson gives you a structured way to build your concentration gradually through **attention reps**.

The principle of progressive training

In fitness, you start with a manageable load and increase it gradually. Attention works similarly. Each successful block at your current level makes the next level more reachable. Each failed block at an unrealistic level teaches your brain that focus is frustrating.

Newport makes a related argument in *Deep Work*: if you constantly give in to distraction during downtime, it becomes harder to resist distraction when you want to concentrate. That's why attention training includes some changes outside your work blocks too.

The Focus Ladder: block length progression

Use this progression over the 30-day reset and beyond. Move up a step when you complete four blocks at the current step with a focus rating of 4 or 5.

Step	Block length	Target
1	25 minutes	4 successful blocks
2	40 minutes	4 successful blocks
3	55 minutes	4 successful blocks

Step	Block length	Target
4	75 minutes	4 successful blocks
5	90 minutes	4 successful blocks
6	90 minutes + second block	Ongoing

A “successful” block means you stayed on your target the whole time, apart from brief moments of drift that you caught and corrected. Start at the step that fits your Depth Budget training level (Lesson 2.2).

Four attention exercises

Beyond work blocks, these short exercises build your concentration capacity.

1. Single-tab reading (15-30 minutes). Read a long article, a book chapter, or a report with every other tab and app closed. When you notice your attention wandering, gently bring it back to the text. Use paper books if screens pull you away too easily.

2. Walking problem-solving (20-30 minutes). Newport describes a practice he calls “productive meditation”: take a walk while focusing your mind on a single well-defined problem. Try it: before your walk, write one question (“How should I structure the proposal?”). During the walk, keep returning to that question. When your mind drifts, bring it back. Afterward, write down what you figured out.

3. Breath-focus practice (5-10 minutes). Sit quietly and pay attention to your breathing. When your mind wanders, which it will, notice it and return to the breath. The practice isn’t about achieving a blank mind. The rep is the *return*. Each time you notice and come back, you’re practicing the exact skill you need during focus blocks.

4. Boredom tolerance. Deliberately let yourself be a little bored in small moments: waiting in line, riding in an elevator, sitting in a waiting room. Instead of reaching for your phone, just look around or think. This reduces the habit of filling every gap with stimulation, which makes it easier to stay with a hard task when it becomes uncomfortable.

Scheduling distraction instead of focus

A useful twist on the boredom idea comes from Newport’s book: instead of scheduling occasional breaks *from* distraction, schedule the times you *allow* yourself to use the internet or your phone for non-essential things, and stay offline in between. You can try a light version of this:

- Pick three “open” windows in your day, for example 12:30 p.m., 3:30 p.m., and 7:00 p.m., for news, social media, and browsing.

- Outside those windows, don't open those sites or apps.
- If you feel the urge, write it down for the next window.

This teaches your brain that distraction happens on a schedule, not on demand.

Tracking your progress

In your workbook tracker, record for each block:

- **Length** (planned vs. actual)
- **Focus rating** (1-5)
- **Number of drifts** noticed

Watch the trends weekly, not daily. Some days will be worse, especially when you're tired, stressed, or sick. That's normal. What matters is the direction over weeks.

Imagine this in practice

Imagine Hana, a researcher who starts at Step 1 because her audit showed she rarely focused more than 15 minutes. She also does 10 minutes of breath-focus practice most mornings and reads on paper for 20 minutes each evening. By the end of the 30-day reset, she's at Step 3, doing reliable 55-minute blocks, and she no longer reaches for her phone the moment she's in a queue.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 6.2: My Attention Training Plan**. Choose your starting step on the Focus Ladder, choose two of the four attention exercises to practice at least four days a week, and set up your open windows for non-essential internet use. Track everything in the block log.

Lesson 6.3: Energy for Focus — Rest, Breaks, and Rhythm

Focus doesn't only depend on discipline and environment. It depends on the state of your body and mind. It's much harder to concentrate when you're exhausted, hungry, dehydrated, or running on no breaks. This lesson covers practical, everyday energy habits that support deep work. It's general educational guidance, not medical advice. If you have ongoing fatigue, sleep problems, or health concerns, speak with a healthcare professional.

Match work to your energy

Your Focus Audit showed when your energy is naturally highest. Most people have predictable patterns: a peak window, a dip (often mid-afternoon), and sometimes a second, smaller peak. Use this to schedule your work:

Energy level	Best work
Peak	Zone 1 deep work: your lead project, the hardest thinking
Moderate	Lighter deep work: editing, reviewing, planning
Low	Zone 2 shallow work: email, admin, routine tasks
Very low	Rest, a walk, or ending the day

The most common mistake is using peak energy for email and low energy for the hardest work. Swap them.

Breaks that actually restore

Not all breaks are equal. Scrolling social media during a break often leaves you more scattered, because it's another stream of information your brain has to process. Better breaks tend to be:

- **Physical:** stand, stretch, walk, climb a set of stairs.
- **Outdoor or nature-based:** even a few minutes outside, or looking out a window at greenery.
- **Social, in person:** a brief, relaxed chat with a colleague or friend.
- **Quiet:** closing your eyes, listening to music, or just sitting.

A simple rule: **during breaks, move your body and rest your eyes; don't fill your mind.**

Break timing

A rough guide:

- After a 25–45 minute block: a 5-minute break.
- After a 60–90 minute block: a 10–20 minute break.
- After two long blocks: a longer break, like lunch or a walk.

If you're in a great flow and your block timer goes off, you can keep going, but set a firm limit. Skipping every break usually catches up with you later in the day.

Sleep: the foundation of focus

Poor sleep makes almost everything in this course harder. Many people find that when they're short on sleep, they reach for distractions more often, struggle to start hard tasks, and give in to urges more easily. You don't need a perfect routine, but these basic habits commonly support better sleep:

- A consistent wake-up time, including most weekends.
- A wind-down period before bed without work email (see the shutdown ritual in Module 7).
- Keeping phones out of the bedroom, or at least out of reach.
- Limiting caffeine later in the day, according to what you know about how you respond to it.

If you consistently struggle with sleep, please talk with a healthcare professional. It's a common and treatable issue.

Fuel and hydration

Basic habits help: keep water at your desk, eat regular meals, and notice whether heavy meals before a focus block leave you sluggish. Keep it simple and don't overthink it. The goal is to avoid obvious energy crashes during your deep work.

Protect recovery time

You can't focus deeply all day, and you can't focus deeply every day of the year without rest. Deep work capacity depends on real downtime: evenings, weekends, and holidays where you step away from work. We'll cover this in more detail in Lesson 7.3.

When energy is low

On days when you're tired, unwell, or stressed:

- **Shrink, don't skip.** A 25-minute block on your lead project keeps momentum without draining you.
- **Choose easier deep tasks,** like reviewing or outlining instead of drafting.
- **Rest without guilt.** Sometimes the most productive choice is to rest so tomorrow's blocks go better.

Common questions

"I'm not a morning person. Does deep work have to happen early?" No. Place deep work in *your* peak window, whenever that is. The audit data is more reliable than general advice.

"Should I use caffeine to get through blocks?" That's a personal choice and depends on how you respond to it. Many people find it's most useful when timed for the start of their peak block, and less helpful late in the day because of its effect on sleep. If you have health concerns, ask a healthcare professional.

"My afternoon slump is severe." Put shallow work and meetings there, take a short walk before it hits, and don't schedule demanding tasks in that window unless you have no

alternative.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 6.3: My Energy Map**. Map your energy across a typical day, match each energy level to a type of work, design your break menu, and choose two energy habits to practice during the rest of the reset.

Module 7: Sustain (Part 1) — Contain the Shallow, Close the Day, Recover

Deep work doesn't happen in a vacuum. It sits inside a day full of necessary shallow tasks and needs recovery to stay sustainable. In this module you'll contain shallow work so it stops leaking into focus time, adopt a set of daily ritual templates, including a shutdown ritual, and design rest that actually restores you.

Lesson 7.1: Shallow Work Containment

Shallow work isn't the enemy. Invoices need paying, forms need signing, schedules need coordinating. The problem is when shallow work is everywhere, spread thinly across the entire day and interrupting everything else. **Containment** means giving shallow work a clear home, so it gets done efficiently and stays out of your focus blocks.

The three containers

Use three containers for shallow work:

- 1. Processing windows** (from Lesson 5.1): set times to handle email, chat, and messages.
- 2. Admin blocks:** one or two longer blocks per week, usually 60–90 minutes, for batches of admin: expense reports, filing, scheduling, forms, updating systems, and small tasks that pile up.
- 3. The Quick-Task list:** a running list of small tasks (under 10 minutes) that you pull from during low-energy moments, like the afternoon dip or the gap between two meetings.

When a shallow task shows up during a focus block, it goes into your parking lot and then into one of these containers. It doesn't get done right then.

Batching: why grouping similar tasks helps

Switching between different kinds of tasks has a cost (Lesson 1.1). Doing similar shallow tasks together reduces that cost. It's usually faster to:

- Reply to ten emails in one sitting than one email every half-hour.
- Make five phone calls back-to-back than scattered through the day.
- Process all your expenses at once at the end of the week.

Group your shallow work by type:

Batch type	Examples	When
Communication	Email, chat, calls	Processing windows
Admin	Forms, expenses, filing, scheduling	Weekly admin block
Errands and logistics	Ordering supplies, booking travel, household tasks	Weekly admin block or lunch
Micro-tasks	Quick replies, small updates, minor edits	Quick-Task list, during dips

Set a shallow-work ceiling

Shallow work tends to expand to fill whatever time you give it. Decide in advance roughly how much of your week it should take. For example: “No more than 40% of my working hours on shallow work.”

In *Deep Work*, Newport suggests having a conversation with your manager about what share of your time should go to shallow work. That idea is worth borrowing. It turns a vague feeling (“I’m drowning in admin”) into a clear agreement you can work toward. A script:

“I’ve been tracking my time, and about [X]% goes to admin and email. I think I could deliver more on [lead project] if that was closer to [Y]%. Could we talk about what I could reduce or hand off?”

Reduce shallow work at the source

Before batching a task, ask whether it needs to happen at all:

- **Eliminate:** reports nobody reads, duplicate updates, approvals that add no value.
- **Automate:** recurring payments, email filters, templates, calendar scheduling links.
- **Delegate:** tasks someone else could do well, especially if it’s part of their growth.
- **Simplify:** lower the standard where “good enough” really is good enough.

Revisit your Depth Map (Worksheet 1.2): your Zone 3 and Zone 4 tasks are prime candidates.

Schedule your whole day, not just your blocks

Some people find it useful to plan their entire workday in advance, assigning every part of it to a block: focus, processing, admin, meetings, breaks. Newport recommends a version of this in his book. You don’t need to follow the plan rigidly; when the day changes, redraw the

plan for the remaining hours. The point is that every hour has a job, so shallow work can't quietly take over.

A simple daily layout might look like:

Time	Block
8:30–10:00	Focus block: lead project
10:00–10:15	Break
10:15–10:45	Processing window
10:45–12:00	Meetings or second focus block
12:00–1:00	Lunch
1:00–2:30	Meetings
2:30–3:00	Quick-Task list
3:00–4:00	Lighter deep work or admin
4:00–4:30	Processing window + shutdown ritual

Imagine this in practice

Imagine Grace, an office manager whose role is mostly shallow work by nature. She can't turn her job into four hours of deep work a day, and that's fine. Containment still helps. She sets three processing windows, a Friday morning admin block, and one 60-minute focus block on Tuesdays and Thursdays to redesign the office's onboarding process, her leverage project. Her day feels less frantic, and the process finally gets built.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 7.1: Shallow Work Containment Plan**. Set up your three containers, set your shallow-work ceiling, list five tasks you'll eliminate, automate, delegate, or simplify, and draft a time-blocked plan for one full workday.

Lesson 7.2: Daily Ritual Templates and the Close-Out Loop

How you start and end your working day shapes everything in between. Without a clear start, the first hour dissolves into email. Without a clear end, work follows you home: open loops, half-finished thoughts, a vague sense that you should be doing more. This lesson gives you four daily ritual templates, with special attention to the end-of-day **Close-Out Loop**.

Why endings matter: the science of open loops

Unfinished tasks tend to stay on our minds. In 2011, psychologists E. J. Masicampo and Roy Baumeister published studies showing that unfinished goals can intrude on people's thoughts and interfere with other tasks, but that making a specific plan for how to complete the goal reduced that interference. You don't need to finish everything to feel settled. You need a trusted plan for what's unfinished.

That's the job of the Close-Out Loop. Newport describes a similar practice he calls a "shutdown ritual," and many productivity systems include some version of it. Here's ours.

Template 1: The Start-Up Ritual (10-15 minutes, before your first block)

1. **Arrive without inbox.** Don't open email or chat yet.
2. **Review today's plan.** Look at your time-blocked plan (Lesson 7.1) and adjust if needed.
3. **Confirm your first target.** Read yesterday's next-move note and your block target.
4. **Set the scene.** Phone parked, focus mode on, signal object out (Lesson 4.3).
5. **Begin your first block.**

Template 2: Block Entry (2-5 minutes)

1. Close everything not needed for the target.
2. Phone in its parking spot.
3. Timer set.
4. Target read aloud.
5. Starting Script (Lesson 3.2) if resistance is high.

Template 3: Block Exit (3-5 minutes)

1. Write the next-move note.
2. Log the block: time, length, focus rating.
3. Process the parking lot.
4. Stand up, stretch, and take a real break.

Template 4: The Close-Out Loop (10-15 minutes, end of workday)

The Close-Out Loop has five steps:

1. **Capture.** Do a final sweep of your inbox, chat, notes, and parking lot. Make sure every open task is written down somewhere you trust, not just held in your head.
2. **Decide.** For each open task, decide *when* it will happen: tomorrow, later this week, or a specific date. Add it to your calendar or task list.

3. **Plan tomorrow.** Sketch tomorrow's time-blocked plan. Write the target for tomorrow's first focus block.
4. **Tidy.** Close all tabs and apps except what's needed to start tomorrow's first block. Clear your desk.
5. **Say the words.** End with a short, consistent phrase that marks the end of work, like "Close-out complete" or "Done for today." It sounds small, but a verbal marker helps signal the transition. Newport uses a set phrase in his own ritual, and the idea is simple and effective.

After the Close-Out Loop, the working day is over. If a work thought pops up in the evening, remind yourself: "It's captured, and there's a plan." If something genuinely new comes up, jot it down in a note and let it wait for tomorrow.

Customizing your rituals

Rituals work best when they're short, consistent, and yours. Adjust them freely:

- **Shorter:** on busy days, a two-minute version of the Close-Out Loop (capture, first target for tomorrow, close tabs) is far better than none.
- **Physical cues:** a specific song, making tea, changing clothes, or a walk can strengthen the transition.
- **Remote work:** closing the laptop and putting it away physically, or leaving your workspace, can create a "commute" effect.

Rules for evenings

The Close-Out Loop works best when you stick to a simple rule: **after close-out, no work email or chat**, unless there's a specific, planned exception (like being on call). If your role requires some evening availability, define it narrowly: "I check once at 8 p.m. for urgent items from my team, 10 minutes maximum."

Imagine this in practice

Imagine Luis, a consultant who used to check email until bedtime and often lay awake thinking about client work. He starts using the Close-Out Loop at 5:30 p.m. every day, ending with "Close-out complete" and closing his laptop in a drawer. The first week, he's tempted to check. By the third week, he finds he's more rested in the mornings and his first focus block starts faster because tomorrow's target is already written.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 7.2: Daily Ritual Templates**. Customize all four templates (Start-Up, Block Entry, Block Exit, Close-Out Loop), choose your end-of-day phrase, and define your evening rule. Use the 7-day checklist to track your rituals for one week.

Lesson 7.3: Rest That Restores

A common trap for people who get serious about focus is turning every waking hour into an optimization project. But deep work depends on recovery. Your attention is limited, and it needs genuine rest to renew. This lesson helps you design downtime that truly restores you, so you can come back to your work with energy.

Why rest isn't optional

Think of your capacity for concentrated work as something that gets spent each day and replenished through rest. If you're always "on," checking work email at dinner, thinking about tasks on weekends, never fully disconnecting, you never fully recover. Over weeks and months, this can show up as lower-quality focus, irritability, and a feeling of being constantly behind.

Newport argues in *Deep Work* that downtime improves the quality of deep work, partly because the mind keeps working on problems in the background and partly because attention needs time to recharge. You've probably experienced this yourself: an insight that arrives on a walk or in the shower, after you've stopped trying.

Three kinds of rest

Different kinds of rest restore different things. A balanced week usually includes some of each.

Kind of rest	What it looks like	What it restores
Physical	Walking, stretching, sport, sleep, time outdoors	Energy, body tension
Mental	Hobbies, reading for pleasure, music, cooking, crafts	Attention, creativity
Social	Unhurried time with friends and family, community activities	Connection, perspective

Notice what's missing: passive scrolling. It can feel restful in the moment, but many people find it leaves them more scattered. It's fine in moderation; just don't mistake it for your main form of rest.

Designing high-quality leisure

Leisure that restores well often has three qualities:

1. **It's absorbing.** It holds your attention without being stressful, like playing music, gardening, a sport, or a good book.
2. **It's different from your work.** If you work on screens all day, rest away from them. If your work is physical, rest might be quiet and still.
3. **It's chosen, not defaulted.** Deciding in advance what you'll do with an evening makes it far more likely you'll do something satisfying rather than drift.

Try planning a few leisure activities each week, the same way you plan focus blocks. It might feel odd to schedule fun, but it works.

Protect your days off

- **Keep work apps off your personal phone** where possible, or at least hide them on weekends.
- **Set an out-of-office message** for vacations, with a clear return date and an alternate contact.
- **Take real breaks.** A vacation spent checking email is not a vacation. If you must stay reachable, define one short, limited check-in.

Recovery after intense periods

After a Sprint (Lesson 2.3), a big launch, or a heavy deadline, plan deliberate recovery. That might mean a lighter week, shorter focus blocks, or a day off. Intense focus periods followed by planned recovery tend to be more sustainable than constant medium-intensity strain.

When rest doesn't feel restful

If you're resting and still feel drained, irritable, or unable to switch off for weeks at a time, pay attention. It may be a sign of burnout or another issue worth discussing with a healthcare professional or counselor. Good focus habits can help, but they're not a substitute for proper support.

Imagine this in practice

Imagine Farah, a startup founder who works evenings and weekends by default. She schedules two "offline evenings" a week for climbing and cooking with friends, keeps Saturday fully off work, and ends each Sprint with a lighter Friday. After a month, she notices her Monday focus blocks are sharper, and her best product ideas are arriving on her Saturday hikes.

Common questions

“I feel guilty when I’m not working.” That’s very common, especially for people who’ve spent years being always available. Remind yourself that rest is part of the system: it’s what makes tomorrow’s focus blocks possible. Schedule it so it feels like a commitment, not an indulgence.

“My downtime is taken up by caregiving and chores.” Real rest may come in smaller pieces for you: a 15-minute walk, 20 minutes of reading, an evening with the phone in another room. Small, deliberate rest still counts.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 7.3: My Rest Plan**. Inventory your current rest across the three kinds, design a weekly leisure plan with at least two absorbing activities, and set your rules for evenings, weekends, and vacations.

Module 8: Sustain (Part 2) — Make It Stick

A reset only matters if it lasts. In this final module you'll build a weekly review to keep the system on track, create a relapse plan for when life knocks you off course, and lock in your 30-day implementation plan and what comes after it.

Lesson 8.1: The Weekly Depth Review

Daily rituals keep each day on track. The **Weekly Depth Review** keeps your whole system aligned with what matters. It's a 30–45 minute session, usually at the end of the week, where you look back, learn, and plan ahead. It's also the single habit most likely to keep your deep work practice alive over time.

When and where

Pick a consistent time: Friday afternoon, Sunday evening, or Monday morning before your first block. Put it on your calendar as a recurring event, and treat it like a focus block: phone parked, notifications off.

The five parts of the review

1. Score the week (5 minutes). Fill in your Depth Scorecard:

Metric	This week	Target
Deep hours completed		
Focus blocks kept (vs. planned)		
Average focus rating (1–5)		
Close-Out Loops completed		
Processing windows respected		
Lead project progress (1–5)		

2. Reflect (10 minutes). Answer three questions: - What went well, and why? - What got in the way? - What's one thing I'll change next week?

Keep it specific. "I was distracted" isn't useful. "Chat pings during Tuesday's block broke my focus three times because I forgot to turn on focus mode" is.

3. Check the lead project (5 minutes). Review your 90-day outcome (Worksheet 2.1). Is your lead project still the right priority? What's the next milestone? What deep tasks does it

need next week?

4. Plan next week (10-15 minutes). - Confirm your focus blocks on the calendar. - Assign a target to each block. - Run a quick meeting triage on next week's calendar. - Schedule your admin block and processing windows.

5. Clear the decks (5 minutes). Process any loose notes, parking-lot items, and open tasks. Empty your downloads folder and desktop. Start next week clean.

Using your scorecard data

Over a few weeks, patterns emerge:

- **Blocks kept but focus ratings low?** Look at environment (Module 4) and energy (Lesson 6.3).
- **Blocks planned but not kept?** Look at calendar protection (Lesson 3.3) and communication norms (Module 5).
- **Good blocks but little project progress?** Check your targets (Lesson 3.1) and whether you're working on the right things (Lesson 2.1).
- **Everything slipping at once?** Go to the relapse plan in Lesson 8.2.

Adjusting your Depth Budget

Every two weeks, review your Depth Budget (Lesson 2.2). If you've hit your target consistently with good focus ratings, take your growth step: add about 15 minutes per day, or add one more block per week. If you've consistently missed, reduce the target slightly. There's no shame in that. A slightly smaller target you hit is better than a bigger one you keep missing.

Monthly: the mini-audit

Once a month, repeat a one-day version of your Focus Audit (Lesson 1.3). Compare it with your original. The difference is often motivating, and it can reveal new distractions that have crept in.

Imagine this in practice

Imagine Daniel, a data scientist. His Friday review shows he kept 7 of 9 planned blocks, averaged a 3.5 focus rating, and made good progress on his model. The two missed blocks were both on Wednesday, when a recurring meeting overran. He moves Wednesday's block to the afternoon and asks the meeting organizer for a hard stop. The next week, he keeps all 9 blocks.

Common questions

“The review takes me over an hour.” In the first few weeks, that’s normal. It speeds up as your system settles. If it keeps running long, time-box each of the five parts and use a timer.

“I keep skipping the review.” Attach it to something you already do weekly, like after Friday lunch or with Sunday evening tea, and shorten it to a 15-minute version: score, one change, confirm next week’s blocks.

“Can I review with someone else?” Yes, and many people find it helpful. A colleague or friend doing a similar practice can review with you for 15 minutes each week. Share scorecards, name one change each, and check in the following week.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 8.1: Weekly Depth Review**. Schedule your recurring review, then run your first full review using the scorecard, reflection questions, and planning checklist. Make copies of this worksheet for each week.

Lesson 8.2: The Relapse Plan — When the System Breaks

At some point, your system will break down. A family emergency, a crunch week, an illness, a new job, a holiday season: something will knock you off your routine. This isn’t failure. It’s life. What matters is how quickly and gently you get back. This lesson helps you build a **relapse plan** in advance, so returning is automatic rather than a struggle.

Expect lapses

Research on habits consistently shows that occasional misses are normal. Phillippa Lally’s 2009 habit study at University College London found that missing a single opportunity to perform a behavior didn’t meaningfully affect the long-term habit-building process. The danger isn’t the lapse. It’s the story you tell yourself about it: “I’ve blown it, so what’s the point?” That all-or-nothing thinking turns a missed day into a missed month.

If-then plans for predictable obstacles

Psychologist Peter Gollwitzer’s research on **implementation intentions** found that people who plan specific responses to specific situations, in an “if X, then Y” format, are more likely to follow through on their goals. Use this for your most likely obstacles:

If...	Then...
A meeting is scheduled over my focus block	I'll move the block to the next available slot the same week, rather than deleting it
I miss my morning block	I'll do a 25-minute pocket session before 3 p.m.
I catch myself scrolling during a block	I'll close the app, surf the urge, and return with the smallest next step
I skip my Close-Out Loop	I'll do a 2-minute version the next morning before opening email
I have a crunch week	I'll switch to "Minimum Viable Depth" (see below)
I'm sick or exhausted	I'll rest fully and restart with a single short block when I'm better

Minimum Viable Depth

When life gets hard, don't abandon your practice. Scale it down to a **Minimum Viable Depth** (MVD) version: the smallest form of the practice that keeps it alive. For example:

- One 25-minute block per day on the lead project.
- Two processing windows instead of three.
- A 2-minute Close-Out Loop.

MVD keeps the identity ("I'm someone who protects focus") and the habit intact. When things calm down, you scale back up instead of starting over.

Warning signs

Identify your early warning signs of drift, so you can act before a full relapse:

- Email is open during focus blocks "just this once."
- Phone creeps back onto the desk.
- Focus blocks get deleted instead of moved.
- Weekly Reviews get skipped.
- You notice yourself working late most evenings.

Pick two or three signs that are most likely for you. When you notice one, run a **Reset Day**.

The Reset Day protocol

A Reset Day is a one-day return to basics. You don't need a full day off work; just follow these steps within your normal day:

1. **Re-read your One-Page Outcomes** (Worksheet 2.1). Reconnect with why this matters.
2. **Redo the Digital Reset quickly** (Worksheet 4.2): turn notifications back off, tidy your home screen, reactivate focus modes.
3. **Re-schedule your blocks** for the coming two weeks.
4. **Do one focus block**, even a short one.
5. **Complete a Close-Out Loop.**

Self-compassion, not self-criticism

When you slip, talk to yourself the way you'd talk to a friend: "That was a hard week. It makes sense the routine slipped. What's the smallest step to get back on track?" Harsh self-criticism tends to make people avoid thinking about their goals at all. A kinder, practical response makes it easier to return.

Imagine this in practice

Imagine Maria, a teacher who built a strong routine during summer planning. When the school year starts, everything falls apart for two weeks. Her warning sign, work email on her phone at night, shows up on day three. She switches to MVD: one 25-minute block each morning before students arrive for lesson planning, plus a 2-minute close-out. After two weeks, she runs a Reset Day and rebuilds to three longer blocks a week.

Life changes, not just lapses

Sometimes the system breaks because your situation has changed for good: a new role, a new baby, a move, a health issue. In that case, don't just return to the old plan. Go back to Module 2: redo your One-Page Outcomes, recalculate your Depth Budget, and choose a Depth Pattern that fits your new reality. Adjusting the system is not quitting. It's what a sustainable practice looks like.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 8.2: My Relapse Plan**. Write if-then plans for your five most likely obstacles, define your Minimum Viable Depth, list your early warning signs, and personalize the Reset Day protocol.

Lesson 8.3: Your 30-Day Implementation Plan and Beyond

You've learned the full Reset Loop: Reveal, Elect, Schedule, Shield, and Sustain. This final lesson ties it into one day-by-day **30-Day Implementation Plan** and shows you how to keep going after the reset is complete.

How the 30 days are structured

The plan follows the Reset Loop in four phases. Each phase builds on the one before, and each ends with a short check-in.

Phase	Days	Focus	Key outputs
1. Reveal and Elect	1-7	See your patterns and choose what matters	Focus Audit, Depth Map, One-Page Outcomes, Depth Budget, Depth Pattern
2. Schedule and Shield the Environment	8-14	Build blocks and redesign your surroundings	Four-part blocks, Starting Script, calendar protection, Friction Ladder, Digital Reset, focus space
3. Shield People and Mind	15-21	Set communication norms and train attention	Communication rhythm, scripts, meeting triage, urge surfing, Focus Ladder, energy map
4. Sustain	22-30	Build rituals, rest, and reviews	Shallow work containment, daily rituals, rest plan, Weekly Review, relapse plan

Your workbook contains the full day-by-day version with a checkbox for each day. Here's the summary:

Days 1-7: Reveal and Elect - Day 1: Start-Here Self-Assessment; Lesson 1.1; begin your Focus Audit. - Days 2-3: Continue the audit; Lesson 1.2 (Depth Map). - Day 4: Lesson 1.3; complete the audit summary. - Day 5: Lesson 2.1 (One-Page Outcomes); choose your lead project. - Day 6: Lesson 2.2 (Depth Budget). - Day 7: Lesson 2.3 (Depth Pattern); Phase 1 check-in.

Days 8-14: Schedule and Shield the Environment - Day 8: Lesson 3.1; run your first four-part block. - Day 9: Lesson 3.2; write your Starting Script. - Day 10: Lesson 3.3; schedule four weeks of blocks. - Day 11: Lesson 4.1 (Friction Ladder). - Day 12: Lesson 4.2 (Digital Reset, about an hour). - Day 13: Lesson 4.3 (focus space) and your Environment Design Guide summary. - Day 14: First Weekly Depth Review (read Lesson 8.1 now); Phase 2 check-in.

Days 15-21: Shield People and Mind - Day 15: Lesson 5.1 (communication rhythm). - Day 16: Lesson 5.2; have your first boundary conversation. - Day 17: Lesson 5.3 (meeting triage). - Day 18: Lesson 6.1; start your Urge Tally. - Day 19: Lesson 6.2; choose your Focus Ladder step and exercises. - Day 20: Lesson 6.3 (energy map). - Day 21: Weekly Depth Review; Phase 3 check-in.

Days 22-30: Sustain - Day 22: Lesson 7.1 (containment). - Day 23: Lesson 7.2; start your daily ritual templates. - Day 24: Lesson 7.3 (rest plan). - Day 25: Lesson 8.2 (relapse plan). - Days 26-27: Practice days: run your full system with no new material. - Day 28: Weekly Depth Review. - Day 29: One-day repeat of the Focus Audit; compare with Day 1-4. - Day 30: Lesson 8.3; complete your 30-day reflection and 90-day plan.

Every day from Day 8 onward, run at least one focus block at your Depth Budget. From Day 23, run your Close-Out Loop daily.

If you fall behind

You don't need to follow the calendar perfectly. If you miss a few days, pick up where you left off. If life gets very busy, use the Minimum Viable Depth version (Lesson 8.2) and continue the lessons when you can. The plan is a guide, not a test.

After day 30: the 90-day horizon

At the end of the reset, you'll have a working system. The next 90 days are about making it second nature:

- **Weeks 5-8: Stabilize.** Keep your blocks, rituals, and Weekly Reviews consistent. Take your first growth step on the Depth Budget if you've been hitting targets.
- **Weeks 9-12: Expand.** Consider adding a second daily block, trying a Sprint for your lead project, or proposing a team focus norm.
- **End of 90 days: Re-elect.** Revisit your One-Page Outcomes. Did you achieve your lead outcome? Choose your next lead project and adjust your system for the next quarter.

Keep it simple

The biggest risk after a program like this is overcomplicating. If you remember only five things, remember these:

1. **Know your lead project.**
2. **Protect a daily block for it.**
3. **Park the phone and close the inbox during blocks.**
4. **Close out each day.**
5. **Review weekly.**

Everything else in this course supports those five habits.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 8.3: 30-Day Reflection and 90-Day Plan**. Compare your Day 29 audit with your original, answer the reflection questions, and set your goals and plan for the next 90 days. Then turn to the **30-Day Implementation Plan** at the back of the workbook, and if you haven't already, use it to track your progress day by day.

Closing: Your Attention Is Yours Again

You've reached the end of The Deep Work Reset. Take a moment to notice how far you've come. You started by looking honestly at where your attention was going. You chose the work that matters most. You built focus blocks into your calendar and protected them from your devices, your inbox, other people's expectations, and your own urge to escape hard work. You built rituals to start and end your day, designed rest that restores you, and prepared for the moments when the system breaks.

That's the full Reset Loop: **Reveal, Elect, Schedule, Shield, Sustain**. And it's yours to use again whenever you need it: at the start of a new job, a new project, a new year, or after a stretch where things slipped.

What to do next

- **Keep your Weekly Depth Review on the calendar.** It's the habit that holds the rest together.
- **Keep your workbook nearby.** Re-read your One-Page Outcomes and your relapse plan when you feel drift.
- **Repeat the reset.** Many people find it helpful to run through the 30-day plan again once or twice a year, especially Modules 1 and 4, to catch new distractions that have crept in.
- **Keep learning.** If you'd like to go deeper into the ideas behind this course, Cal Newport's *Deep Work* and Gloria Mark's *Attention Span* are both worth reading. They'll add context to the practices you've built here.

A final reminder

Some weeks will be great. Some will be messy. Your focus won't be perfect, and it doesn't need to be. The goal was never to become someone who never gets distracted. It was to become someone who notices, returns, and keeps protecting time for the work that matters.

Every focus block you keep is a vote for the kind of work and the kind of life you want. Keep casting those votes, one block at a time.

Your attention is yours again. Use it well.

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