

“Being indistractable is the essential skill for our time.”

— GREG McKEOWN, author of Essentialism

in distract able

How to Control Your Attention
And Choose Your Life

LESSON PLAN

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WITH JULIE LI

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About This Lesson Plan

This lesson plan is written for English composition classes, study-skills courses, and introduction to college seminars. It is intended for the introductory college level but would also be suitable for high school or ESL/ELL students.

This lesson plan includes more activities than would typically be used in a course; instructors can choose the activities or discussion questions that best fit their needs.

Most of the assignments in this lesson plan can be done individually or in groups, verbally or in writing.

Features include pre-reading activities, chapter discussion questions, personal reflection questions, time management exercises, critical thinking scenarios and essay prompts.

Pre-Reading Exercises

Pre-Reading Exercise 1: Activating Background Knowledge

Step 1: Make a list of all the activities you personally tend to do when procrastinating on a homework assignment. (Examples: check Facebook, pet my cat, wash the dishes, watch TV).

Step 2: Put a checkmark next to all the items on your list that you believe are valuable activities—those that hold meaning for you or are important to do. (For example, from the list above: pet my cat, wash the dishes).

Step 3: Examine the items on your list that do not have a checkmark. (For example, from the list above: check Facebook, watch TV). What do you notice about these items? What features do they have in common?

Step 4: Write a paragraph speculating why you might choose to engage in non-valuable activities (those you didn't check on your list) when you are supposed to be doing schoolwork. What leads you to do those activities rather than focusing on the work you need to complete?

Pre-Reading Exercise 2: Preview and Predict

Examine the book and answer the following questions.

1. Who is the author? What can we find out about the author from looking at the book?
2. When was this book published?
3. Is the book fiction or nonfiction?
4. What do you think the book will be about? How can you tell?

Pre-Reading Exercise 3: Accessing Bonus Materials

Step 1: Visit Nir Eyal's website, *Indistractable.com*

Step 2: Scroll down until you see, "Get your *Indistractable* Exclusive Bonuses." Enter the information requested (if you don't have the order/receipt number, you can leave it blank) and press "Access your bonuses."

Step 3: Check your email for a message from Eyal that contains a link to bonus materials.

Step 4: Click the link and explore the webpage it takes you to. What materials are available on this webpage? Which of these materials might be useful to you?

Pre-Reading Exercise 4: Silent Sustained Reading and Discussion

Read: Take ten minutes to read the Introduction and Chapter 1. Make sure to annotate, marking any ideas that stand out to you and any sections you have questions about. If you can't write in your book, note important sections on a piece of paper.

Discuss:

1. Why did Nir Eyal write this book? What personal or professional background and experiences led him to write it?
2. What does he mean by "Indistractable"? What kinds of distractions is he referring to?
3. Do you relate the common issues with distraction that Eyal describes? Why or why not?

Pre-Reading Exercise 5: Workload Planning

Look in your class syllabus to find the following information:

1. Which chapters do you need to read and annotate (take notes on) for next class?
2. How many pages of reading will this be?
3. How long do you think it will take to do this reading?
4. When and where do you plan to do this reading? What days and times will you set aside to read? (Example: I will read for two hours on Sunday morning before my workout class and one more hour on Sunday evening).

Discussion Questions

There are four discussion questions provided for each chapter and two personal reflection questions at the end of each part of the book.

Chapter 1: What's Your Superpower?

1. What strategies did Eyal try in the past to attempt to lessen his distractions, and why didn't these strategies work?
2. What does Eyal suggest is the reason people allow themselves to become distracted?
3. This chapter describes the "parts" (or sections) of the book. What are the parts, and what information will be in each part?
4. Eyal suggests an alternate sequence for reading the book, rather than reading each chapter in order. What is this alternate sequence, and what type of reader should use it?

Chapter 2: Being Indistractable

1. What does Eyal mean by "traction"?
2. In what ways are distractions today similar to those in the past?
3. In what ways are distractions today worse than in the past?
4. What types of harm are caused by people being distracted?

Introduction Personal Reflection Questions

1. Which types of distractions are most common for you? What do you find yourself doing to procrastinate?
2. In which areas of your life do you have healthy traction? In which areas of your life would you like to increase your traction?

Part 1: Master Internal Triggers

Chapter 3: What Motivates Us, Really?

1. What happened to Zoe Chance when she started using the pedometer?
2. What factors in Chance's life led to this reaction?
3. How did Chance solve the problem of the pedometer?
4. What does Chance's example show about why people become addicted to technology?

Chapter 4: Time Management is Pain Management

1. Why does the human mind tend to be dissatisfied? What is beneficial about this tendency?
2. Why do you think many people would rather give themselves an electric shock than sit quietly for fifteen minutes?
3. Eyal describes four psychological tendencies that lead to dissatisfaction: boredom, negativity bias, rumination, and hedonic adaptation. Explain each of these tendencies.
4. Have you experienced any of these four tendencies? When?

Chapter 5: Deal with Distraction from Within

1. What is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and what is its approach towards undesirable behaviors?
2. Why is fighting against our unwanted desires and cravings ineffective, according to this chapter? Why doesn't fighting them help us overcome them?

3. In the Israeli study, why did the flight attendants traveling to Europe have cravings after a few hours of not smoking, while the flight attendants traveling to New York did not have cravings until many hours later?
4. What does the flight attendant study show about cravings? How might this study apply to other types of cravings besides cigarettes?

Chapter 6: Reimagine the Internal Trigger

1. What does Eyal mean by “trigger”? What are some examples of triggers?
2. What does he suggest that people should do to avoid acting based on triggers?
3. What is a “liminal moment” and why is this a dangerous time for distractions?
4. What is the ten-minute rule, and how can it help people avoid becoming distracted?

Chapter 7: Reimagine the Task

1. Interactive computing professor Ian Bogost says something can be fun even if it isn’t enjoyable. What does he mean by this? How does he define “fun”?
2. How can people make tedious tasks fun, according to Bogost?
3. What strategies does Bogost use to make mowing his lawn more fun?
4. What strategies does Eyal use to make writing more fun? How has this helped him gain traction in his career?

Chapter 8: Reimagine Your Temperament

1. What is the meaning of “ego depletion”?
2. Why is the theory of ego depletion incomplete, according to Eyal?
3. What factors actually lead to poor self-control?
4. What does Eyal suggest we do in order to have better self-control?

Part 1 Personal Reflection Questions

1. What feelings do you usually feel when you don't want to focus on schoolwork or other important tasks? (You might use the Distraction Tracker, available on page 236 or in the online *Indistractable* tools, to help examine these feelings over time). What emotional reactions to your work lead you to become distracted?
2. Based on what you read in Part 1, what steps can you take to avoid reacting to uncomfortable feelings that arise when you try to work? How could you respond to these feelings besides procrastination and distraction?

Part 2: Make Time for Traction

Chapter 9: Turn Your Values into Time

1. Eyal includes the following quote from the Roman philosopher Seneca: “People are frugal in guarding their personal property; but as soon as it comes to squandering time, they are most wasteful of the one thing in which it is right to be stingy” (53). What do you think Seneca means in this quote, and why does Eyal include it in this chapter?
2. Eyal argues that to-do lists are not the most effective way to organize one’s time; what reasons does he give?
3. What are the three life domains introduced in this chapter, and how can they help people organize their time?
4. Eyal suggests making time in the week to “reflect and refine” one’s calendar. Describe this process and how it can help people plan their time more effectively.

Chapter 10: Control the Inputs, Not the Outcomes

1. Why does Eyal place “you” at the center of his three domains; why is it the most important?
2. What types of activities might fall under the “you” domain?
3. How does Eyal manage to overcome his sleeplessness? What lesson can readers learn from this story?
4. What does Eyal mean when he writes, “When it comes to our time, we should stop worrying about outcomes we can’t control and instead focus on the inputs we can” (63-64)?

Chapter 11: Schedule Important Relationships

1. What are some examples of ways that Eyal prioritizes his relationships with his family? How might you use his methods to prioritize your own relationships?
2. How did Eyal create more equality with his wife in terms of running their household? Why is equality between partners important?
3. Why does Eyal believe people should prioritize relationships with their friends?
4. How did Eyal make time for friendships after he had children? What methods could you use to make time for friends, even when life is busy?

Chapter 12: Sync with Stakeholders at Work

1. Eyal argues that many workplaces don't have clear expectations about employee duties and workload. What are some examples of unclear expectations from the chapter?
2. Why might people with long work hours be less productive at their jobs, according to Eyal?
3. Why was April struggling to get all her work done? What factors were preventing her from being as productive as she wanted?
4. What solution does April find to solve her work struggles? How does this solution help her?

Part 2 Personal Reflection Questions

1. What are some areas of your life outside of school and work that you would like to make more time for? What are some strategies you could use to make time for valued activities in your personal life and relationships?

2. What interruptions do you face when you are working on a project (for school, work, or personal enrichment)? How could you communicate to others around you in order to avoid interruptions?

Part 3: Hack Back External Triggers

Chapter 13: Ask the Critical Question

1. What is an external trigger? Why is this trigger called “external,” and what differentiates it from an “internal” trigger?
2. Eyal encourages people to ask themselves, “Is this trigger serving me, or am I serving it?” (84). What does he mean by this question? What types of triggers serve us, and which are served by us?
3. Studies show that just having a smartphone nearby can lower people’s focus on their work, even if they do not look at the phone. Why is this?
4. What does the term “hack” mean? How do electronic tools hack our brains, and what does it mean to “hack back”?

Chapter 14: Hack Back Work Interruptions

1. Why were the nurses at Kaiser making mistakes with distributing medications? What about their working conditions led to the mistakes?
2. What method was used to reduce medication errors? Why was this method so successful?
3. What other methods does Eyal suggest for avoiding interruptions by coworkers?
4. What is the concentration crown, and when does Eyal’s wife use it?

Chapter 15: Hack Back Email

1. How much time do workers spend responding to emails, according to Eyal? Why is this activity often a waste of time?

2. Why are people tempted to read and respond to emails when they could be concentrating on other work?
3. What strategies does Eyal recommend to reduce the number of emails received?
4. What strategies does Eyal recommend to reduce the length of time spent on each email?

Chapter 16: Hack Back Group Chat

1. What is “group chat,” and how is it different from email?
2. In what ways does group chat provide distractions and lower productivity?
3. Why does Eyal say to use group chat “like a sauna” (102)?
4. What strategies does Eyal recommend to increase the value of group chats?

Chapter 17: Hack Back Meetings

1. What problems does Eyal identify with work meetings? Why are they often a waste of time?
2. What two items should always be sent out before a meeting, according to Eyal? How will these items make meetings more productive?
3. Eyal argues that large meetings should not be used for brainstorming. What situation would be more effective for brainstorming, according to Eyal?
4. Eyal argues that electronic devices such as phones and laptops should not be allowed in meetings; why not?

Chapter 18: Hack Back Your Smartphone

1. Why does Eyal remove apps that he enjoys, including Facebook and YouTube, from his smartphone? When and how will he use these sites instead of on his phone?
2. Why does Eyal recommend wearing a wristwatch?
3. Productivity expert Tony Stubblebine recommends sorting phone apps into three categories. What are the categories, and what types of apps go in each one?
4. What changes does Eyal recommend people make to app notifications on their phones?

Chapter 19: Hack Back Your Desktop

1. What steps did Robbert van Els use to make his computer's desktop less distracting?
2. Why is a cluttered desktop detrimental to focusing on work?
3. Van Els put the following slogan on his de-cluttered desktop: "What we fear most is usually what we most need to do" (118). What does this slogan mean, and why might it be helpful to van Els?
4. Besides clearing his desktop, what steps does Eyal take to make sure his computer is not a source of distraction?

Chapter 20 Hack Back Online Articles

1. In the opening of this chapter, Eyal describes an imaginary conversation between himself and the internet. What is the internet trying to persuade him to do in this conversation, and what is this story meant to show?
2. What strategy does Eyal use to make sure he doesn't become distracted by online articles? What technology tools help him achieve this strategy?
3. What is "multichannel multitasking," and how does Eyal use this to increase his productivity?
4. What is "temptation bundling"? What examples does Eyal give?

Chapter 21: Hack Back Feeds

1. What does the word "feeds" refer to in the chapter title? Which common websites and apps have feeds?
2. Why are feeds more distracting than other types of web pages or apps?
3. When Eyal needs to use a website with a feed but does not want to get distracted, what tools and strategies does he use to avoid the feed?
4. Eyal sets aside time in his schedule to watch YouTube videos; how does he avoid wasting his time on videos he didn't intend to view?

Part 3 Personal Reflection Questions

1. What external triggers most often distract you on your phone, computer, or other technological devices? What steps could you take to remove these triggers?
2. What activities do you most often use to procrastinate? What strategies could you use to avoid accidentally or mindlessly wandering into a procrastination activity?

Part 4: Prevent Distraction with Pacts

Chapter 22: The Power of Precommitments

1. What does the term “procommitment” mean, according to this chapter? What are some examples of precommitments?
2. Eyal summarizes the story of Ulysses and the Sirens. What happens in this story, and how does it connect to the topic of avoiding distractions?
3. What is a “Ulysses pact”? What are some examples of Ulysses pacts?
4. In this chapter, Eyal describes pacts as the fourth step in the Indistractable system. What are the four steps, in order? Why does he believe that creating pacts should come after the other steps?

Chapter 23: Prevent Distraction with Effort Pacts

1. What are “effort pacts,” and how do they prevent unwanted behaviors?
2. What examples does Eyal give of smartphone or computer apps that can be used for effort pacts? How do these apps work?
3. Why is there less social pressure to stay focused at work now than in the past, according to Eyal?
4. When Eyal works from home, he often partners remotely with someone else who is also working from home. How does this partnership help him stay focused, and why is it an example of an effort pact?

Chapter 24: Prevent Distraction with Price Pacts

1. A study found that people trying to quit smoking are more motivated by the punishment of losing money than by the reward of gaining money. Why is this, according to the chapter?
2. What price pact did Eyal use to keep himself focused on writing the book *Indistractable*? Why was this pact so effective in getting him to finish the book?
3. What are some situations in which a price pact might not be effective, according to the chapter? Why wouldn't the price pact work well in those situations?
4. According to Eyal, what should a person do if they fail to achieve their goal and have to give up their money?

Chapter 25: Prevent Distractions with Identity Pacts

1. What is an “identity pact,” and how can it help people modify their behaviors?
2. Participants in a study were more likely to stick to a diet when they used the word “I don’t” rather than the word “I can’t” for unhealthy foods. Why is “don’t” more effective than “can’t” for avoiding undesirable behaviors?
3. What actions does Eyal suggest to help build an “Indistractable” identity?
4. In another study, people trying to lose weight found they consumed fewer calories if they performed a ritual before their meals. What was the ritual, and why do you think it was effective?

Part 4 Personal Reflection Questions

1. Which pacts do you think might be helpful to you from Part 4? Which pacts could you try, and how would you use them?

2. What changes could you make to your identity to help you gain traction towards your goals? For example, someone who wants to quit smoking could adopt the identity of a “non-smoker.” What identities could you adopt?

Part 5: How to Make Your Workplace Indistractable

Chapter 26: Distraction is a Sign of Dysfunction

1. Why does a dysfunctional workplace environment lead employees to engage in distracted behavior such as checking email too often or participating in unnecessary group chats, according to Eyal?
2. What are “job strain” and “effort-reward imbalance”?
3. What behaviors of the two partners at Boston Consulting Group (BCG) led their employees to be overly stressed about work?
4. What is the “cycle of responsiveness,” and how can this lead to problems at a company, according to Leslie Perlow?

Chapter 27: Fixing Distraction is a Test of Company Culture

1. What reasons did the partners at BCG give for not being able to give employees one weekly night of freedom from work?
2. Eyal writes, “What began as a challenge to find a way to let members of one team disconnect one night per week profoundly changed the working culture at BCG” (173). Explain this statement; what larger changes resulted from the efforts to organize the weekly night off?
3. What is “psychological safety,” and how does it lead to a more effective workplace?
4. What are the three steps companies should take to create psychological safety, according to behavioral scientist Amy Edmondson?

Chapter 28: The Indistractable Workplace

1. The Slack corporate offices have signs reading, “Work hard and go home” (177). What policies and technologies does the company use to support this slogan?
2. What positive personal work habits make the CEO of Slack a role model for his employees?
3. Why does Slack have company discussion channels for topics such as pet photos and Star Wars?
4. What are the ways that Slack employees can give feedback to their supervisors? Why are these opportunities important for a well-functioning workplace?

Part 5 Personal Reflection Questions

1. Think of a time when you or someone you know had poor work-life balance, with work taking too many hours needed for other activities. What effect did the excessive work hours/duties have on employees? How did it impact the quality of their life and their work?
2. If you are ever in charge of a company, what steps will you take to make sure that employees can have strong traction in their work and also in their lives?

Part 6: How to Raise Indistractable Children (And Why We All Need Psychological Nutrients)

Chapter 29: Avoid Convenient Excuses

1. What does the phrase “convenient excuses” refer to in the title of this chapter? Who is making convenient excuses, and about what?
2. Many recent articles have blamed smartphones and the internet for problems faced by children and teenagers, including anxiety and depression. Why is it incorrect to blame these new technologies, according to Eyal?
3. What evidence does Eyal give to contradict the common idea that teenagers are naturally rebellious?
4. What items besides phones and the internet have been blamed for children’s bad behavior throughout history, as described in this chapter?

Chapter 30: Understand Their Internal Triggers

1. According to behavioral experts Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, what three components do humans need in order to be psychologically healthy?
2. American children often begin to lose interest in their studies starting in middle school. According to researchers, what aspects of middle school and high school make it difficult for students to focus?
3. Why does the increased use of standardized testing lead American students to want to play video games, according to Richard Ryan?
4. Why have social activities for children decreased since the 1950s, and how does this contribute to their desire to spend time online?

Chapter 31: Make Time for Traction Together

1. Lori Getz, an expert in internet safety for kids, gives the following advice for parents whose children are spending too much time on their phones: “Make [the conversation] about how you’re treating and interacting with the people around you” (199). What does she mean by this?
2. How does Eyal convince his daughter to go to bed at a reasonable hour? Why does his strategy succeed?
3. What advice does Eyal give to the mother of teenagers who seem addicted to the online game *Fortnite*? What strategies does he suggest, and why does he think they will be effective?
4. What does Eyal’s family do to make sure they spend quality time together?

Chapter 32: Help Them with External Triggers

1. Eyal draws an analogy between smartphones and swimming pools. What point about smartphones does he make through this analogy?
2. Why does Eyal suggest giving younger children a limited phone that can only be used for calling and texting?
3. What does Eyal believe older children should be able to do before they are given a phone with more features?
4. During which activities is it especially important that children not be interrupted, according to Eyal?

Chapter 33: Teach Them to Make Their Own Pacts

1. How did Eyal help his daughter develop her own rules around screen time when she was five?
2. How did his daughter’s self-created rules change as she got older?

3. Why is it important for kids to monitor their own screen time, rather than following rules created by adults?
4. Why does Eyal believe that disagreements between parents and kids about time management are natural and healthy?

Part 6 Personal Reflection Questions

1. What disagreements did you have with your own parents or guardians about how to manage your time? How did your parents/guardians react to these disagreements; for example, did they punish you, make strict rules, complain, hold family meetings? How well did their strategies work to help you learn to manage your time?
2. If you have children now or if you have them in the future, how will you teach your children to manage distracting technologies such as smartphones, video games, and computers?

Part 7: How to Have Indistractable Relationships

Chapter 34: Spread Social Antibodies Among Friends

1. What is “social contagion,” and how does it affect people’s behavior?
2. What does “social antibodies” mean, and what are some examples from the chapter?
3. What is “phubbing,” and why does Eyal recommend that people start using this word?
4. What other strategies are recommended in this chapter to avoid distractions during time with friends?

Chapter 35: Be an Indistractable Lover

1. What was the first step Eyal and his wife took to restore their intimacy as a couple? Why didn’t this step work?
2. How did Eyal and his wife handle the stress of wanting to look at their phones? What methods did they use to address this stress?
3. What tools did Eyal and his wife use to guide them away from using technology in their bedroom?
4. What superpower did Eyal’s daughter want? How does this superpower connect to the book’s theme of being Indistractable?

Part 7 Personal Reflection Questions

1. Who in your life would you like to spend more quality time with? What are some strategies you could use to make time for this relationship?

2. What strategies can you use to be more fully present for the people in your lives, rather than being distracted?

Time Management Exercises

Distraction Tracker

Use the Distraction Tracker (available on page 236 or in the online *Indistractable* tools) to track your distractions for three days while you are doing homework (or other important activities that require focus). After three days, reflect on your list of distractions. What most commonly distracts you? What steps can you use to avoid your common distractions?

Timeboxing

Create a schedule of your perfect week (a template is available on page 233 or in the online *Indistractable* tools). Try to follow the schedule for a week. After the week has passed, reflect on your schedule and answer the following questions (from page 57):

1. “When in my schedule did I do what I said I would do and when did I get distracted?”
2. “Are there changes I can make to my calendar that will give me the time I need to better live out my values?”

Strategy Practice

Choose one strategy from the book to try in your own life. It could be a “hacking” strategy, a “pact,” or a strategy for spending quality time with loved ones. Try the strategy before next class, then report back on how it went.

Critical Thinking Scenarios

Scenario 1: The Disconnected Family

You are a family therapist.

Mrs. and Mr. Lee are concerned because their family doesn't seem to be connecting well. Their two children, ages nine and twelve, always repeatedly ask to leave the table before dinner is over to play on their iPads. If they aren't allowed to leave the table, they become upset and refuse to make conversation. The Lee parents feel that dinner is an important time for family bonding since both Mr. and Mrs. Lee have demanding jobs and usually get back to work on their laptops right after dinner.

Present a set of recommendations for the Lee family. Include three passages from *Indistractable* (2-3 sentences each) to support your recommendations. Each passage should come from a different chapter.

Scenario 2: The Distracted Parent

You are a child psychologist.

Your client Janie is upset because her mother doesn't seem to be paying attention to her. Janie is in her first year of high school and is having some troubles feeling comfortable and making friends. Every time she talks to her mother, her mother seems distracted and checks her phone often, and ends the conversation by telling Janie that she'll make friends soon. Janie's mother is a single parent who is very busy with her job as an executive at a company. Janie doesn't want to upset her mother but wants to tell her mother how to be more supportive.

Present a set of recommendations to help Jamie work with her mother. Include three passages from *Indistractable* (2-3 sentences each) to support your recommendations. Each passage should come from a different chapter.

Scenario 3: The Unbalanced Workplace

You are the head of the Human Resources department at Sally's Delicious Snacks, a baked-goods company.

The CEO of the company has asked you to create a plan to help employees balance their work and home lives. Several important employees have quit in the last few months due to family obligations such as helping a sick parent or needing more flexible hours for childcare reasons. The CEO wants to create a company culture that would retain valuable employees who also need to value and prioritize their families.

Present a set of recommendations to give to the CEO of Sally's Delicious Snacks. Include three passages from *Indistractable* (2-3 sentences each) to support your recommendations. Each passage should come from a different chapter.

Scenario 4: The Dysfunctional Office

You are a business consultant who helps business solve their problems.

Hard Worker Marketing Solutions, a small marketing company, has hired you to make suggestions for improving their corporate climate. Many employees have reported feeling stressed by the company culture, which expects employees to be available by email and phone all day during regular work hours except for when they are at a meeting. In anonymous surveys, when asked the question, "My time at the office is structured well to allow me to achieve my best work," eighty percent of employees answered "disagree." The company's executives would like to reverse this number to have an eighty percent or higher "agree" response.

Present a set of recommendations for Hard Worker Marketing Solutions. Include three passages from *Indistractable* (2-3 sentences each) to support your recommendations. Each passage should come from a different chapter.

Essay Prompts

Choose one of the following prompts to respond to. For either prompt, you should support your response with examples from your own knowledge and experience and discussions of passages from *Indistractable*.

Prompt 1. Drawing from the lessons in *Indistractable*, assess your own level of focus and make a plan to gain traction towards one goal or a set of related goals. You might choose to focus specifically on your school and career goals or some other set of goals (for example, goals around health or sports, art and creativity, family, etc.). What distracts you from working towards these goals? What specific strategies will you take to limit distractions and gain traction?

Prompt 2. Based on *Indistractable* and your own experiences, what recommendations do you have for other students to achieve their goals for study and work? What strategies should they use to limit distractions and achieve traction? (Note: you can also choose to give advice about reaching another type of goal, such as workout goals or family goals, if you have experience in this area).