

**I. Rationale:** Since the core of what we do in English classes—writing and, especially, reading—requires sustained focus, I like to get students to reflect on their own challenges with maintaining focus. It's a struggle we all feel, right? Intense focus can be hard for everyone these days, and the reasons why are obvious (Phones! The internet!). But it helps to see the problem in the context of larger shifts in our culture. Such a perspective can help reveal how we are all caught up in a system that's looking to steal our attention and how we can, at least in some small ways, steal that attention back and give ourselves more space to read and write and to simply be present and enjoy life.

## **II. Sequence:**

**Step 1 Freewrite and Discussion:** Have students freewrite about their thoughts about attention/focus and technology. (Example prompt questions: Many people think that technological devices—and particularly phones—are having a negative effect on our ability to focus. What do you think? Are we all addicted to our tech/phones? Are you? Why or why not?). As a starting point, you could also get each student to pull out their phone and check their usage stats and reflect on their app usage and screen time. Students have a LOT to say about this topic—and may even be willing to share their screen-time stats—so discussion should flow freely, but before that discussion begins, I like to tell them that I don't want to play generational blame games or engage in any "kids these days" kinds of arguments. I share with them that my peers and I are very much implicated in this problem. For instance, I often hear people my age bemoan their dwindling attention spans. I also tell them that, over the years, I've heard SOO many students say things like "I think people our age are okay, but it's the kids who are younger (like my younger siblings) who are really going to have problems!" And this strikes me as an unhelpful variation on the "kids these days" argument . . . so I tell them that, instead, we are going to think about the bigger picture.

**Step 2 Watch and discuss video:** Jared Henderson definitely focuses on that bigger picture in his "Why We Can't Focus" video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QltxZ-vPMc>). He uses several media theorists (Neil Postman, Marshall McLuhan, and Nicholas Carr) to break down the shift from the "typographic mind" brought on by the printing press to the image and soundbite focus of the television age to the overstimulation we get from our current internet/app era. All the while, he stresses reading actual books as a way to rescue our ability to focus, and he gives several other helpful suggestions for re-training our brains to focus. This video really resonated with my students, and I imagine yours will also have a lot to say about it if cued by some general questions (What surprised you? What stood out to you? What got you thinking? Where do we go from here? Do you like Henderson's suggestions for improving focus? Do you do any of them already? Are they realistic? Do you have other suggestions?). If students don't pick up on it themselves (and they probably will), I would suggest underlining Henderson's points about the internet being a "hostile design environment" that "steals our attention" while we must "give our attention" to books.

**III. Continuing the discussion:** There are lots of ways to keep students engaged with this topic after the lesson ends. Here's a few suggestions:

- Make a homework assignment involving a particular focus-training exercise (e.g., going for phone-less walk, or reading a book chapter or watching a movie phone- and internet-free, or keeping a log of your attention for one day) and have students write a short reflection on how it went.
- Use the video/discussion to generate a paper prompt. I did that this semester (Spring 2025), and it led to a lot of good papers!
- Simply call back to the discussion a few times over the course of the semester and remind students that it helps to be aware of what you are paying attention to and to what's stealing that attention. I also like to remind that I (along with all of us older folks) are in the struggle with them.