# Academically Talented Youth Program LogoAVOIDING DIGITAL DISTRACTIONS WHILE COMPLETING HOMEWORK

“I don’t care if a kid wants to tweet while she’s watching *American Idol*, or have music on while he plays a video game. But when students are doing serious work with their minds, they have to have focus.”

“Parents can draw a line when it comes to homework and studying—telling their kids, ‘This is a time when you will concentrate on just one thing.’”   
((http://blogs.kqed.org/mindshift/28561/how-does-multitasking-change-the-way-kids-learn/)

Before I start lecturing you on how much you allow yourself to be distracted by your electronic devices, please know that I write this as a reminder to myself, as well! I, too, have a MacBook, an iPhone, an iPad, various social media accounts, and a Kindle. I love to play games. I like to text my friends. I enjoy posting little videos to Instagram while making a playlist on Spotify. Let’s face it: we live in a digital era. So I won’t be telling you that you need to throw all your devices away because they are evil, but I will be giving you some tips that will help you get your homework done!

First off, homework will take two-to-three times longer if you have your phone nearby, social media apps up, or even the internet running. It’s too tempting to start “researching” what you’re writing about and the next thing you know, you have gone down a two-hour wormhole about the connections between Dr. Who and Sherlock Holmes. And you were supposed to be writing about the Romantic poets!

## Two important items to remember:

#1: No one truly multitasks well.

#2: No, seriously, you are NOT the exception.

## Tips for all of us:

* If you have absorbed the **Homework Tips** and **Time Management Strategies for Students** handouts and have followed those tips, you are in a great starting space. If you have not implemented those tips yet…go back, reread the documents, and **set that foundation now!**
* **Turn off the Internet!** If there are things you think you need to double-check or research in your writing, follow author Cory Doctorow’s advice:

*Don't research*

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

* **Turn off your phone!** If you can’t be trusted (c’mon, you *know* if you can or can’t), give your phone to your parent or guardian for safekeeping until your homework session is over. Again, Mr. Doctorow says:

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

* **Know what you’re facing!** Many students (and adults) don’t realize how much time they spend on their digital devices. To get an accurate idea, try the following:
* Estimate how much time you spend texting/on social media/watching videos, etc.
* Write down your estimate on a piece of paper and give it to someone for safekeeping
* For two weeks, track the time you spend doing those digital activities (be honest, this is just for you and this is a judgement free zone).
* Compare your original estimate with your actual time. Are you surprised?
* Decide if you need to make adjustments to complete your homework.

P.S. I didn’t include music – some people find it helps them to concentrate, some find it a distraction. Does it make a difference if there are lyrics? Have someone observe you while you work and listen to music – which is it?

## Programs to help keep you honest—explore these with your folks to find the best fit for you (some are free and some have a fee):

* For Mac users: [selfcontrolapp.com](http://selfcontrolapp.com)
* PC users: [sourceforge.net/projects/temptblocker/](http://sourceforge.net/projects/temptblocker/)
* For help with time-management (Mac and PC): [gottcode.org/focuswriter/](http://gottcode.org/focuswriter/)
* This one reminds you to take breaks to optimize productivity and freshness:   
  (Mac only) [dejal.com/timeout/](http://www.dejal.com/timeout/)

and [publicspace](http://www.publicspace.net/Vitamin-R/).net/Vitamin-R/

* Problems keeping away from social media? This one does ask for a fee. (Mac and PC) [freedom.to](http://freedom.to)
* One more program that works with windows: [getcoldturkey.com/](http://getcoldturkey.com/)

## Oh hey, if it seems like too much work to explore these apps, you can do most of this the old-fashioned way:

1. For time-management, use a kitchen timer!
2. Close all windows on your computer when working except for the one that you are typing on. This cuts down on the temptation to check social media!
3. Tell friends that you will be offline working on homework and ignore their texts during that time. Contrary to what social media tries to tell you, caring for someone does not mean that you will answer their texts 24/7.
4. For help staying off of social media, give your password to a trusted family member. Have that person go in and change your passwords. Get the new passwords once you are done with your homework for the week. (I have had students “lock” themselves out this way for weeks at a time. It’s a smart thing to do when the semester heats up and deadlines loom fast and furious!)

**Do you know of more helpful applications not listed above? Share them with us and your classmates! Your knowledge and experience could really make a difference. Here’s to a happy, productive, and less stressful school year!**