

How to Use Distraction to Your Advantage

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Your scatterbrain is great when it is time to think of new ideas. But when it comes to executing those ideas? Not so much.

Have you ever noticed that you find it difficult to ignore the chatter of a radio station playing in the background, or that your best ideas come not from where you were looking, but from something you saw out of the corner of your eye?

Your story fits with a new line of research that's showing highly creative people tend to have minds that pay attention in a particularly "open" kind of way.

Specifically, psychologists say that people who've had creative success often have "leaky attention," meaning that when they are concentrating on one thing, other irrelevant information can still seep into their consciousness (information that's irrelevant to their current task, but potentially very useful longer term).

To switch metaphors, it's as if creative types have an attentional system that's less of a spotlight and more of a lantern that picks up a wide range of information (just as developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik [says babies have](#)). In contrast, most other adults have more of an attentional spotlight that zooms in on one thing at a time.

These laboratory findings could have real-life implications. If this idea of a leaky mind sounds like you, there could be simple ways you can exploit your mental style in some situations, while mitigating against it in others where it could be a drawback.

Let's first look at the research. One relevant [study](#) published last month by psychologists at Northwestern University involved participants looking at a series of large letters made up of little letters on a computer screen ([known as Navon figures](#)), such as a large S made out of little Es or a large A made out of little Hs. Ahead of each one of these letter combos, a symbol appeared onscreen telling the participants whether to pay attention to the big letter or the little letters. The participants' task was simply to indicate as fast as possible whether there was an S or H at the cued level – big or little.

This sounds super easy, but sometimes it was trickier than others because, for instance, the

cue said to pay attention to the big H, but it happened to be made up of little Ss, rather than a neutral letter or, in the easiest version, little Hs. The key thing the researchers were interested in was how much the participants were affected by what was happening at the level they'd been told to ignore.

The important finding was that the more creative achievements that participants said they'd had in real life in 10 different domains including art, dance, and cooking, the more they tended to be distracted by what was happening at the level they'd been instructed to ignore. It's as if the information at that level was leaking into their consciousness, even though to succeed at the task they needed to ignore it.

The more creative the achievements, the more they tended to be distracted by what was happening

A real-life equivalent would be trying to concentrate on reading an article in a magazine, but realizing that your attention has just been grabbed by the ad on the opposite page. This is going to be detrimental to reading the article, obviously, but at the same time that ad could provide the spark for your next creative idea.

We need to be careful about getting too carried away with these initial results. For one thing the research relied on participants' own claims about their creative achievements, so it will be interesting to see if the findings can be repeated with people who have verified creative successes to their name. That said, the idea that creative people have leaky minds makes intuitive sense and it fits with anecdotal reports – for example, and as I documented in the 99U book [*Manage Your Day To Day*](#) – author Jonathan Franzen has described how his writing process involves locking himself away in a bare room and putting on noise-cancelling headphones.

But meanwhile, when you're at the idea generation stage of work, then your leaky mind is your strength. As a result it helps to think of your brain as having two "modes": Idea generation mode and idea execution mode.

At the idea generation phase in the creative process, you can exploit your mental style by exposing yourself to as much noise, buzz, bustle, and distraction as possible. Go to parties, flick through magazines, leave Twitter and Facebook chattering in the background, ride public transport. Do this and the chances are your open mind will let in the very idea you've been waiting for.

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But when it comes time to get to work, you must go through great pains to keep focused. If you think you match the description of a person with a leaky attentional system, then you might want to borrow a page from Franzen's playbook. The café might not be the best place for you to do any work that requires focus, and open-plan offices are definitely to be avoided, if you can help it. Also try not to fluctuate frequently between tasks – more so than less creative types, you are likely to experience distraction and interference between different projects. So schedule set

periods to focus on one thing, making sure to factor in plenty of breaks.

If you need more extreme measures, there are [apps out there for helping focus](#), for example by forcing you to disconnect from the internet for set periods of time. More extreme, [The Most Dangerous Writing App](#) deletes what you've written if you don't continue writing fast enough.

More radical still, you could consider performing [online working memory training exercises](#) that involve juggling information in your mind over short time periods. There's some evidence that these exercises can help improve the control you have over your own attentional focus. But beware, by fixing your leaky mind, you might risk losing your greatest strength – your creativity.