Why can't I concentrate?

By Amy Frykholm
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New research from Carnegie Mellon University confirms what we already knew: Yes, distraction does make us stupider. The little red flag at the bottom of my computer screen is not a harmless little reminder that I am not alone in the world. It is a constant invitation not to finish a thought. A constant temptation to escape into the urgently irrelevant so as to avoid the complexity and pain of completing a task.

Carnegie Mellon researchers found that being interrupted twice during a simple comprehension test made people answer the questions with 20 percent less accuracy. What Carnegie Mellon didn't study is how compulsively I turn to e-mail, Facebook and the web to save me from the painful task of thinking itself. I would so much rather surf than think, dive into the half-formed thoughts of others than deal with the incomplete task of thinking in front of me.

So I invent reasons to be diverted. I give in over and over to the impulse to look something up rather than think something through.

Paul Miller recently wrote about his own experiment with giving up electronic distractions. He took the research seriously—research like Carnegie Mellon's and that found Nicholas Carr's essay "Is Google making us stupid?"—so he gave up the internet altogether for a year in order to write, think and rediscover the physical world.

Still, Miller says that there's a problem with believing that the internet is the source of your concentration problems. When you turn it off, you realize that *you* are the source of these problems. You cannot magically erase the difficulty with an on/off switch.

Just out of the curiosity, those of you who made it through the 275 words above: How many times were you interrupted while reading? Did you click on the links? Did you wander off into the internet's netherlands and then, for who knows what reason, wander back?

As for me, I was tempted to quit writing and look something up on Google—something that no doubt would have been helpful to my writing—no less than four times. That’s once every 70 words, once every three minutes. At this rate, I should be able to finish my next book by around 2030, but will it have any finished thoughts in it?