Setting Up a
Distraction Free
Mac & iPhone

So glad you're here!

Thanks for picking up this guide. At The Sweet Setup, our goal is to help you make the most of your time and attention.

And we do this in all sorts of ways...

What we are most known for is the inordinate amount of time we spend researching the very best apps for your Mac, iPad, and iPhone. We also write tips and strategies for using those apps.

As a result of all that work, we know a lot about workflows, staying focused, and best practices. That's why we're visited by over half-a-million readers every single month.

In this guide we'll show you some clever ways to make sure your Mac and your iPhone are as distraction-free as possible.

After working through this guide, your devices will leave you free to focus on what matters to you, rather than being pulled in various directions.

Enjoy...

Shawn Blanc
Founder, The Sweet Setup

Creating a Distraction-Free Anything

In just a second we'll get into the specifics of what you can do to keep your devices a little less buzz-y and ping-y and beep-y. But first, let's talk about the mindset...

Now, you may already know this, but I'm a work-from-home dad. It was in 2011 that I quit my job to start blogging for a living, and I've been working for myself out of my home office ever since.

For more than a decade, I have been teaching and learning about creativity, diligence, and focus. I've spoken about these topics at conferences, taught them to my friends, family, and co-workers, and I continue to implement them in my own life.

I even have several online classes and courses that have helped thousands of people **find focus and get organized**.

In 2007, when the iPhone first came out, I got one and have spent the years since downloading apps, goofing around, and trying to figure out solutions to the challenges related to focus in an age where the Internet lives in our pocket. I have examined my own habits, studied many other solutions, and rigorously tested different approaches over and over again.

All this to say, dear reader, at the end of the day it's all unto giving our time and energy to the things which are meaningful.

I want a lifestyle that is conducive to doing my best creative work without sacrificing my healthy personal and family life.

The truth is this...
Living with diligence and focus is not a personality type — it's a skill you can learn.

In this short guide, we are going to cover some very simple and practical things you can do to keep your devices from distracting you. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. Where it really get's powerful is when you start being intentional about keeping the outside noise and distractions to a minimum. Which, it turns out, you've already done simply by virtue of downloading this guide. Well done!

So… here, at my desk (which is where I'm sitting as I write this very sentence), is where I do so much.

- This is where I edit the photos of my kids that I took on my camera.
- This is where I pay my bills and manage my business and family finances.
- This is where I spend hours each day writing.
- And this is where I spend time building my business.
- Plus, so much more.

I have put a lot of time and thought and money into making sure my home office is a place that fosters creativity and allows for long hours of uninterrupted work.

There are some very, very important components to a distraction-free workspace. And they go beyond just closing your email app. I'll share many of a few of them with you in just a minute.

In short, when you set up your Mac and iPhone to be free from the incoming distractions, then what you've done is given yourself back your time.

This is massive. This is huge! I can't overstate just how critical it is.

There are a few, simple things you can do that have the potential to give you back hours in your day.

Let's dive in….

*"Dost thou love life?
Then do not squander time,
for that's the stuff life's made of."*

Benjamin Franklin

Creating a Distraction-Free Mac

These are the apps I use to remove distractions, do my most important work, and also save time for common tasks on my computer. When all of that is combined, it means it's easy for me to have several hours of focused work time every day.

Quitter

This is a clever little utility app written by Marco Arment. It runs silently in the background and will watch any apps you want (I have it watching my email and twitter apps). Then, if 10 minutes pass without you interacting with those apps, it will quit them for you. The purpose being to help keep you from absentmindedly leaving open a distracting app.

Quitter helps me stay distraction free because it makes sure I don't accidentally leave open any potentially-distracting apps.

Hey Focus

This is like a "proactive" version of Quitter. With Hey Focus, you set certain hours in the day when you don't want to check email, or Twitter, or Facebook, etc. And then if you try to launch that app or website, you're just not able.

From within the settings for Hey Focus you can define certain websites and apps that you want to block when Hey Focus is running. Then you can choose to run Hey Focus on a schedule (I've set it to go from 7am – 11am), and/or you can trigger it manually.

Hey Focus helps me stay distraction free by quietly making sure I don't accidentally wander into a potentially distracting app or website.

Keyboard Maestro

This is a power-user's app to be sure. Use Keyboard Maestro to build custom workflows, shortcuts, automations, and just generally make your computer work in a way that better suits your own needs.

For example, I recently discovered in Todoist that, if you want to create a new task you can't hit **CMD+N** — you have to hit "**q**". But my muscle memory (and brain logic) for creating a new task is to hit **CMD+N**. So I opened up Keyboard Maestro and whipped up a quick macro. Now, any time I'm in Todoist and I hit **CMD+N** then keyboard Maestro will, instead, simulate the "q" key command and — *boom* — I have the new task entry window.

Keyboard Maestro helps me work distraction free by allowing me to set up custom automations so I can work more efficiently on my Mac.

Do Not Disturb

This one comes built-in to your Mac. Go to **System Preferences > Notifications > Do Not Disturb**. From there, you can schedule a start and stop time for DND (just like you can on your iOS device).

Back in the old days, our computers didn't need a setting for Do Not Disturb. But now that I can get incoming text and iMessage alerts right on my Mac, plus all the other notifications from other apps, I need to make sure there is an extended period of time in my day when I can work without interruption.
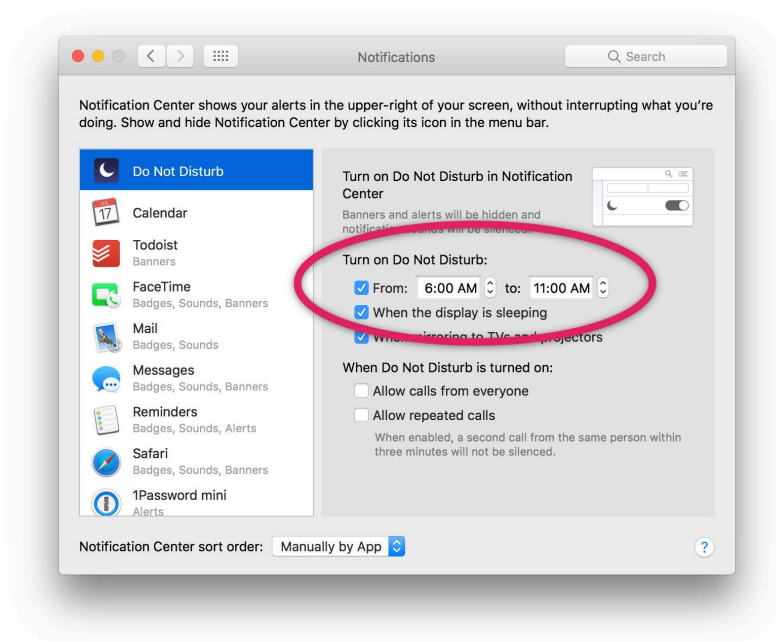
I have my Do Not Disturb setting scheduled from 6:00 — 11:00 AM.

Pro-Tip: While you're in the Notifications section of System Preferences, scroll through the list of apps and turn off or adjust any of the notification options for those apps. If a particular app — *cough, Twitter...* — pops up notifications that you don't need to see, you can easily turn off those notifications by selecting "None" as the alert style.

Bartender

My Mac's menu bar has nearly 20 apps and icons. From the system-supplied ones (such as WiFi, Spotlight, Notification Center, et al.) to the ones I've installed on my own (such as Dropbox, Fantastical, Droplr, 1Password, and more). Without these additional apps, I'm less productive on my Mac, but the price to pay for all of these great tools is that many of them live in the Menu Bar and create a mess of icons.

Bartender cuts down on the visual clutter of a menu bar by placing all the app icons into a menu bar "folder" so to speak. Thus, they are still there when you need them, but they're not causing additional visual clutter.

iA Writer

I spend hours a day writing. And I do all of my writing in iA Writer these days. While **Ulysses** is far more robust, and has some truly awesome features, there's just a feel to iA Writer that, for whatever reason, has won me over.

iA Writer helps me stay focused because is a writing app without any extra bells and whistles. When I'm using it to write (which I do every day) the only thing I even *can* do is just write.

LaunchBar

I *would* say this is the very first app I install on a new Mac, but do people ever start fresh any more? I've been restoring from backups since 2012. But, that's not the point....

LaunchBar is an application launcher (which is **the original**, btw), and it's how I easily launch apps and bookmarks and just generally navigating my computer with the keyboard, etc.

Now, I will mention that over on The Sweet Setup, we recommend **Alfred** as the best app launcher for Mac. Alfred is pretty great. And, in fact, you can use Alfred to create a ton of custom workflows, somewhat like what Keyboard Maestro can do. For me, however, I've just been using LaunchBar for so long that I know it best.

Hazel

Another one of those apps that runs in the background, and keeps things working well without you having to pay it mind. This is how I **manage my paperless office**, keep my Mac's desktop tidy without having to think about it, keep my downloads folder organized, and more.

Here's an example of how I use Hazel to keep my Mac's Desktop clean. I have a rule set up that watches for any file on the Desktop that is at least 3 days old and which hasn't been opened in the past 3 days. Hazel will then take those filed and automatically move them into a folder I have called "Desktop Cleanup".
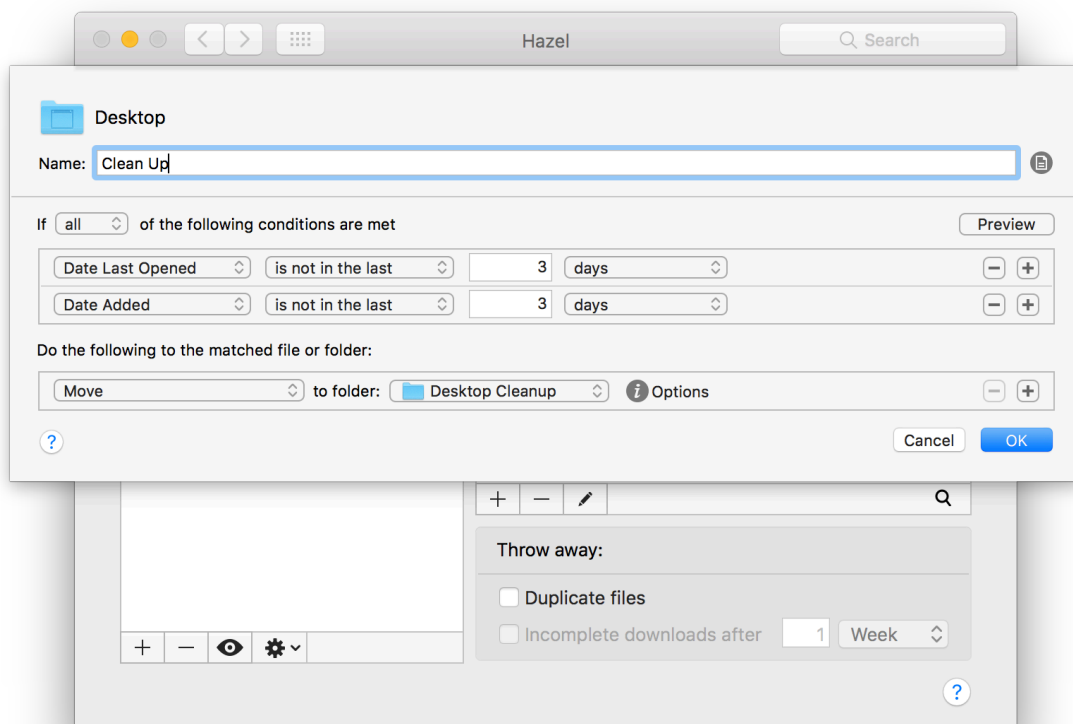
Simplenote

For those times when I just need to jot down an idea, or make a note about something, then I toss it into Simplenote. It syncs with my iPhone and iPad, and I can quickly find any and every single note I've ever dropped in there.

Simplenote helps me stay focused because it's the one app where go to for jotting down notes, ideas, or any other little snippets of text. I can just open it up and write. When I need to make a note of something, no matter how important or trivial, I know that I can drop it into Simplenote.

Basecamp 3

Here at Blanc Media, we've been using Basecamp for several years, but we used it only as a singular piece of a bigger puzzle.

In January 2017 **we began using Basecamp for everything**: file storage, real-time communication, project management and asynchronous communication, etc. And the shift has been liberating. Even for our small team that consists of myself, one full-time employee, and 5 part-time contractors, we've seen a huge uptick in productivity and a huge decrease in stress, anxiety, and the general types of discussions such as: "Where is such-and-such file?"

Todoist

There is no shortage of well-designed, powerful, task-management apps. For nearly 7 years I was a hard and fast OmniFocus user. But in early 2017 I switched over to Todoist.

Mostly, I just wanted something that was a bit more simple and which had a Web-based API so I could get a little bit nerdy with connecting tasks in Todoist with other programs I use (such as Basecamp).

Todoist helps me stay focused because it keeps track of my tasks. I wouldn't say that it is particularly better or worse than any of the other big players out there. But for me, right now, it works well for me.

HazeOver

With HazeOver, when an app comes to the forefront of your Mac display, then the other apps in the background will dim out. Thus, helping keep the focus on the window you're working in.

HazeOver helps me stay focused when I have a whole lot of windows all open at once. This is something I often have gong on, especially when I'm in the middle of a big project or working on something substantial. Because HazeOver keeps the front-most window highlighted and dims out the other windows, it helps me stay focused on only the

BreakTime

This app runs in your Mac's Menu Bar and simply counts down a repeating timer. When the timer goes off, the app reminds you to take a break. This is what I use to shift my desk from the sitting to standing position (or vice versa) and take a 5-minute break every hour.

Backlaze

Backing up your files to an off-site cloud server is an easy, affordable, and safe way to make sure that your most important files are safe. This is **the best off-side cloud backup service** out there. I've been using it for years and

Backblaze helps me stay focused because I know there is a secure backup of all my files in a remote place, thus it's one less thing to think about.

Day One

One of the greatest ways to build some momentum in your work and personal life is to recognize your progress and celebrate all victories — big and small. And one of the best ways to celebrate and chronicle the small victories is with a daily journal.

We often forget about our small wins after a few days or weeks. Or they quickly get buried under our never ending to-do lists. Or, if we don't recognize and

celebrate them, then they stop being "small wins" and start just being "what we should be doing anyway".

By cataloging and celebrating our small wins each day then we can be reminded that we are making meaningful progress. And, in truth, it's the small wins which all add up to actually complete the big projects and big goals. As Benjamin Franklin said, it's little strokes that fell great oaks. And so, to celebrate a big victory is actually to celebrate the summation of a thousand small victories.

Day One helps me stay focused by giving me a place to write down my wins for the day, and thus keep my attention on the things that matter.

Creating a Distraction-Free iPhone

I bought the original iPhone back when it came out in 2007. And it's been within arm's reach pretty much ever since.

I often joke that my iPhone is command central. I use it for so much related to work and personal life. But the little thing can be a huge distraction if I let it.

A big part of creating a distraction-free phone is to simply be intentional about when and where you use it. For example, I rarely get my phone out when I'm standing in line at the store. I use that time to be "bored" instead.

Or, if I do get my phone out during a down moment in my day, I try to send a text message to a friend to tell them how awesome they are. Or I work my brain and make myself write down 3 ideas.

That's one way of going on the offense. To do on the defense, one of the best things you can do is heavily limit the notifications you allow.

Some coworkers may think your crazy, but consider completely eliminating email notifications. And social network notifications, too, while you're at it.

That said, here are some tips and tricks that I've done to help keep my iPhone a bit more calm.

## Enable Do Not Disturb ... For a Longer Amount of Time...

Just like on the Mac, you can schedule when your iPhone goes into and comes out of Do Not Disturb mode.

I have Do Not Disturb scheduled to start at 10pm every night, and to end at 11am every morning. Yep, DND goes for 13 hours of my day. This schedule means that my phone will stay silent if any alerts come as I'm going to bed and all while I'm sleeping.

But by keeping Do Not Disturb turned on until 11am in the morning, it also means that my entire morning routine and the first half of my work day remain uninterrupted. I

don't interrupted by any incoming text messages, email notifications, slack DMs, Twitter DMs, etc.

When this is combined with the Do Not Disturb mode on my Mac, I can sit down at my desk and work on my computer, with my iPhone next to me, and not get a single distracting notification. It's a miracle!
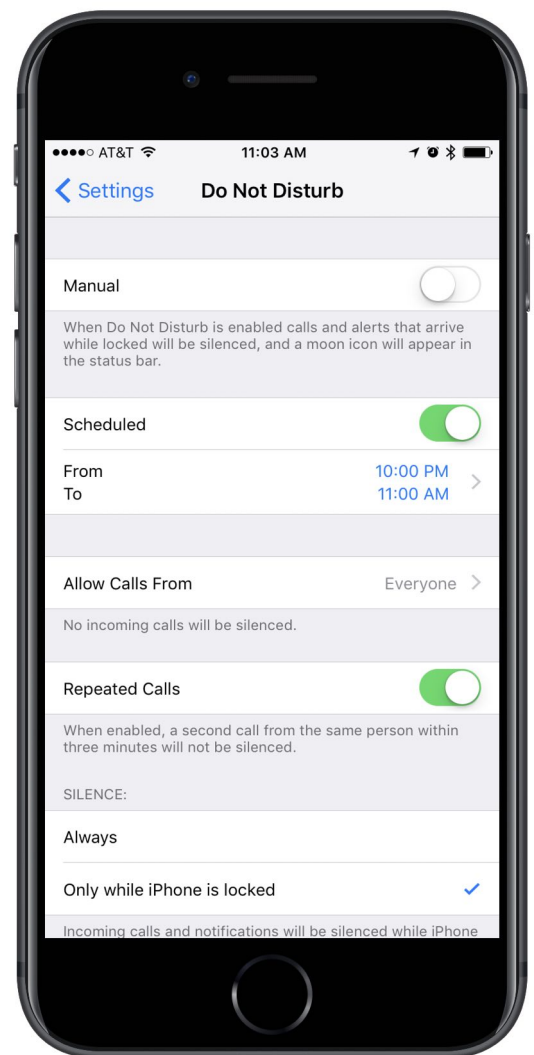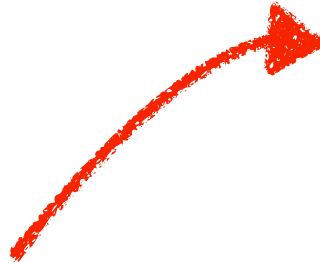
To schedule Do Not Disturb on your iPhone (and/or iPad)

Go to the **Settings** app and tap on **Do Not Disturb**. Then make sure that the button next to "**Scheduled**" is turned on, and then set the **From** and **To** times. As you can see from this screenshot, I have DND scheduled from 10:00 PM to 11:00 AM.

Disable Push for Email and Calendar Data

To do this, go to **Settings > Mail > Accounts > Fetch New Data**.

You can choose to have Push disabled, and thus new incoming emails won't be automatically pushed to your iPhone the moment they arrive. The reality is that if someone needs you immediately, email (hopefully) isn't going to be their chosen communication method.

By putting your accounts on Fetch, you can choose to have your phone check every 15, 30, or 60 minutes. Or to only check when you manually refresh. This allows you to eliminate email a level of distraction if you have notifications enabled for email. And it also helps with saving some battery life.

Reduce Notifications

I have also gone through the **Notifications** settings and made a lot of cuts. Go to **Settings > Notifications** to access this. Almost no apps get badges and most apps get nothing. I ask myself this question: Is there something this app can tell me that I won't find out elsewhere (email, social networking, etc.) that I need to know fairly quickly?

Pro Tip: Create a VIP or turn on email conversation alerts for those times when you are expecting a particular message from someone. This way you know that you'll be notified about it when it comes in and you won't feel the pull to constantly check your email.
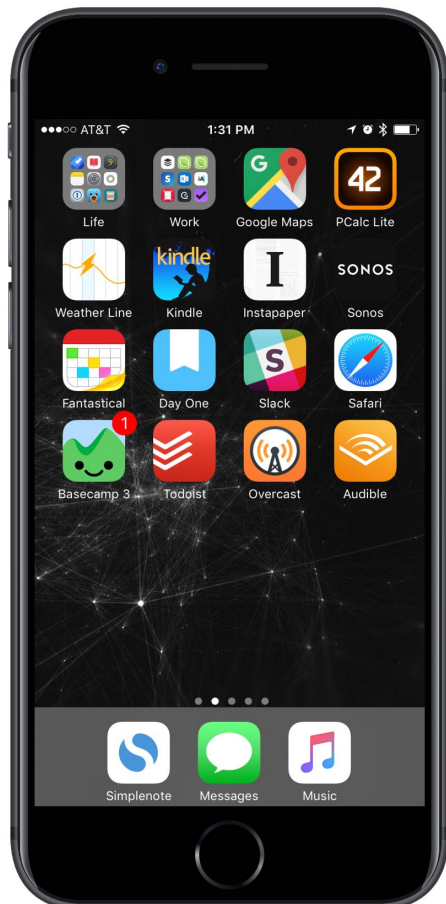
Update Your Home Screen

Real quick, unlock your iPhone and go to the first Home screen...

There are 28 open spots. Of those, how many are populated with apps that (a) are time sinks or (b) you don't even use?

On the left is a screenshot of my iPhone Home screen as I write this guide. You can see that I keep email and social media apps at least one tap or swipe away. I also only have apps there that I use every day or that I need one-tap access to (such as Maps).

Consider moving around the apps on your Home screen so that you're only left with ones that are valuable and that you use every day.

Audit Your iPhone Time and App Usage

Moment is an app I've been using to see how much time I spend on my iPhone each day and also which apps I use on a daily basis. This is great for getting a baseline picture of how I'm spending my time on my iPhone.

It's something that I won't use forever, but I'm going all in with it for now in order to get that "hindsight" for how I *think* I'm using my iPhone compared to how I *actually* am.

To the right, is a report from my own usage of the app Moment after using it for 40 days...
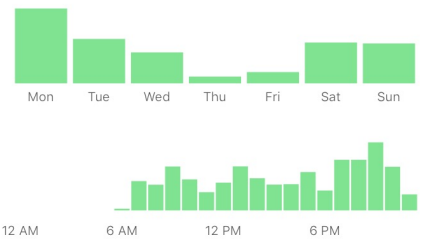
MY DAILY PHONE USE

2H 0M
per day

14H 0M
per week

31
pickups per day

217
pickups per week

The average Moment user spends 3 hours and 42 minutes on their phone and picks it up 52 times every day.

WHEN I USE MY PHONE

1H 59M
weekday average

2H 5M
weekend average

Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat Sun

12 AM   6 AM   12 PM   6 PM

🙂 BEST

11M
on February 15, 2017

🙁 WORST

4H 33M
on February 21, 2017

🖼 SCREEN-FREE

22H 26M
without touching my phone once

📲 LONGEST

1H 3M
straight using my phone once

☀️ WAKE UP

7:23AM
Usual time I pick my phone up first in the morning

💤 GOODNIGHT

10:08PM
Usual time I use my phone for the last time at night

🔼 EVERY

28M
How frequently I pick up my phone

🕐 MY LIFE

14%
How much of my waking life I spend on my phone

MOMENT • inthemoment.io
The Moment app has tracked my phone use for 40 days.

Wrap Up

As I take stock at all these apps, and see them all lined up and listed out like this, it kinda feels like I have a problem. 😜

Gee, Shawn, do you really need to go to such great lengths just to stay focused when you're at work?

Do I *need* all these apps in order to focus? Do I *need* to go to all this trouble to get my best work done?

Well, I think the answer is both "yes" and "no".

Tools, in and of themselves, do give us with the skills we need to do our work. But tools do empower us to do our work better and more efficiently. There are many things I want to do with my time, and intermittently checking email and social media all throughout my day is not on that list. But it is very easy to let email and social media sneak into my working hours. So, I do what I can to keep it out of my way.

Let me ask you this: how often do you have one hour (or more) of uninterrupted work time? How often do you have 3 to 4 hours?

Most people can't remember the last time they had one single long stretch of focused work time. Let alone, getting that time on a daily basis as part of their work schedule.

For me, I work almost every single morning for 3-4 hours without interruption or distraction. And a big part of that is that I've managed to put together a small toolkit of apps and workflows that create a distraction-free work environment.

(And I must admit that literarily as I was writing that last sentence, my 3-year-old son walked into my office to bring me a fresh-baked cookie. 🍪 But he's a distraction that I am more than willing to let in. 😍)

Thank you for reading!

— Shawn Blanc
[@shawnblanc](https://twitter.com/shawnblanc)