

## How to Intensify Your Focus and Be More Productive with the 52/17 Split

### Description

Imagine that for the next two hours, your job is to stare at an unmarked clock face. No numbers, no lines, just a blank white circle. And that a single hand will tick from one position to the next, one tiny move at a time, except for an occasional larger jump – which you must make a note of by pressing a button. How accurate a tally do you think you'd be able to keep over the two hours?

This was a test devised by psychologist Norman Mackworth, who during World War II studied radar and sonar operators who were tasked with staring at a screen for hours upon hours, scanning for dim, weak, blips that might represent an enemy submarine.

In his research, he found that maintaining a high level of concentration for an extended period of time is actually quite difficult. Signal detection accuracy declined by about 10-15% after 30 minutes, and continued to decline over the rest of the period, and he observed that operators were liable to miss critical signals, especially near the ends of their shifts.

Fortunately, even on the worst of days, practicing is still more actively engaging than staring at a radar screen, but we've all been there. Spacing out. Daydreaming. Mindless repetition. "Garbage" practice.

After all, practicing can be repetitive at times, and requires us to detect or discriminate between subtle, tiny details that may fly under the radar (ha!) of the untrained ear. All of which can be tedious, and not always the most exciting thing in the world.

But practice we must, so what are we to do about this so-called "vigilance decrement?" How can we practice productively for long chunks of time and keep our focus from dwindling and taking a nosedive as the minutes tick by?

### Two theories of sustained attention

Well, why does our attention dwindle over time anyway?

There are a few popular theories in the literature, each offering a different explanation. And because each requires a different countermeasure<sup>1</sup> to offset its effects, let's take a look at two of the more likely ones.

#### #1: Resource theory

Resource theory says that vigilance – like monitoring our playing for less than stellar sound, intonation glitches, or ineffective phrasing – is taxing and requires a certain amount of our brain's processing

resources. The reason why our attentiveness goes downhill after a period of time, is that we have only so much cognitive “fuel” in the tank, and performance suffers when we start running low. We can certainly replenish this fuel, but it takes time.

## Countermeasure: Work/rest splits

If this is why our attention starts to fade the deeper into a practice session we get, then the solution is relatively straightforward. Take a break!

Indeed, one of my teachers recommend the **50/10 split**. As in, practice for 50 minutes, rest for 10, then repeat.

This has the advantage of fitting nicely into a 60 minute hour, but is there any evidence that this particular ratio leads to more mindful, engaged, focused, and ultimately, more productive practice than other ratios? I mean, why not 45/15, or 40/20, or heck, 25/5<sup>2</sup>?

Data released by Latvian social networking company Draugiem Group may shed some light on this question. The employees of this company all have a piece of time-tracking software installed on their computers<sup>3</sup>, which monitors everything they do on their computers during the day. Yup, that sounds a little invasive, but it’s intended to provide users with an indicator of how productively they are using their time.

## The 52/17 split?

They company analyzed this data to see if they could identify the habits that set their most productive employees apart from the rest. As it turns out, the 10% of employees who demonstrated the highest levels of productivity didn’t put in more hours in front of their computer. If anything, they put in *less*, following a work-to-rest ratio of **52/17**. As in, 52 minutes of work, then a 17 minute break.

That’s a pretty weird ratio (like, almost 3/1, but not quite...?!), and as you can probably imagine, [not so easy to implement](#). It’s also not clear if this represents an *average* of the top 10% of employees’ actual times, or if they all set timers and followed this ratio exactly. And does 10% of employees mean 10 people? 100? 2?

Regardless, the important part is probably not the ratio itself, but the fact that meaningful breaks were taken between periods of intense goal “sprints,” rather than slogging through a single marathon work session.

Furthermore, what the employees did *during* the breaks may be even more important. Rather than checking personal email, YouTube, Facebook, or engaging in some other online diversion, they physically got away from their desks to do something *away from their computer*. Like engaging in conversation with a co-worker (about non-work topics), taking a walk, or reading a book.

It may not *feel* like taking breaks is productive, but the research in this area, going back several decades,

suggests that we are simply more effective and get more done when we take breaks.

## #2: Mindless theory

Mindless theory suggests that we start paying less attention to the details of the task after a period of time because it becomes increasingly routine, and easier and easier to mindlessly go through the motions. Basically, our brain gets bored, and stops paying close attention to the details of what we're doing.

## Countermeasure: Goal specificity

The solution here is to make the task progressively more difficult – to ensure it never becomes routine. So even if the task is to nail a tricky shift 5 times in a row, each repetition can be different. Intonation could always be even more precise. The shift itself could be more fluid, more effortless, or sound easier to the listener. One's sound could be even more pure. There could be more or less of a gliss on the arrival or departure. An extra wiggle of vibrato. And so on.

As long as we are constantly setting ever more subtle, sophisticated, or specific goals for each repetition, and evaluating our results immediately afterwards, we can reduce the chances of any task becoming truly routine. For more, check out [this article](#) which identifies two key differences between the practice habits of the best and worst free throw shooters.

## Take action

There isn't a consensus on which theory is the "correct" one, and since they could very well both be right, I figure the best strategy for keeping our focus turned up to 11<sup>4</sup> in the practice room is to employ both countermeasures.

1) Try experimenting with a work/rest ratio of 52/17. Or 50/10. Or 25/5. Or whatever interval seems to work for you.

The important thing is to (a) set a timer for a specific practice interval, (b) take a *timed* break, and (c) spend your break away from the practice room, doing something that recharges your batteries and clears your head (And don't even think about firing up your phone and looking for an app for that! The idea is to do this the old-fashioned way, by engaging with people, nature, etc.)

2) Set some specific goals for each practice session. Problems you'd like to solve. Tasks you'd like to accomplish.

Set a specific objective before each practice attempt too. What, specifically, are you aiming for (e.g. I'd like a clean shift)? And what, specifically, are you going to do to achieve that (e.g. I'm going to loosen up my thumb, or get my hand position prepared in advance, or get my elbow around, or keep my scroll up in the air, or ease up with my chin, etc.)?

## Additional reading

If you have a fear of flying, you might want to skip these, but here are two interesting and slightly unsettling articles which provide a glimpse into the cockpit and how the most challenging part of a pilot's job might be staving off boredom.

[The Hazards of Going on Autopilot](#) @The New Yorker

[Airline Pilots Struggle to Stay Focused](#) @CNN

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