TAKE CONTROL OF

WORKING FROM HOME TEMPORARILY

by **GLENN FLEISHMAN**

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Read Me First

Welcome to *Take Control of Working from Home Temporarily,* version 1.0, published in March 2020 by alt concepts inc. This book was written by Glenn Fleishman and edited by Joe Kissell.

Many people have just been asked or required to work from home for an extended period for the first time at their job—or in their career. This book offers hard-won advice from long-time freelancers and remote employees about how to make it work for you.

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Introduction

We know that many millions of people who have never routinely worked remotely have been asked, told, or ordered to carry out their job at home, or have taken the opportunity offered to them to do so, due to the global spread of the coronavirus.

If that's you, we know it may be daunting if you're used to an office for structure, socialization, focus, and resources. But if you must, or you think it's advisable to self-isolate for your own mental or physical well-being—or for that of your family or roommates—we're here to help.

We authors of Take Control titles have racked up hundreds of years of home-office experience across our collective careers, and wanted to offer some advice that we hope will aid easing the transition for you, whether your remote-work requirement lasts days, weeks, or months. I also solicited tips from folks who regularly or always work at home to provide more insight. (Thank you to them!)

Working from home can be a challenge—and it can be an opportunity. No one style or set of advice works for everyone. If you have an employer or manager who can roll with the punches, you can find a style that lets you be efficient, calm, and productive while reassuring them about the quantity and quality of work you perform.

This isn't necessarily going to be easy. We're all in it together. Let's get through this and find a new way forward.

Note: This book assumes that at times or for a long period, normal "third places" often used for work—cafés, libraries, parks, co-working spaces, conference centers, and so on—won't be available. This might be because you're self isolating, because of a recommendation public-health officials, or due to an actual government shutdown. You may be unable to meet up with colleagues safely in person, and conduct all business electronically or by voice and video.

Stake Out Your Space

Before you can work effectively at home, you should figure out where you will carry out your job. It might be a separate room, if you have one; a defined area in space other people use; or a temporary space you set up and break down each working day.

It might be tempting to work ad hoc, balancing a laptop on your knees on a couch or working at a dining room table or kitchen counter (**Figure 1**). But making a space for yourself that you can comfortably spend hours at each day will help you define your work structure.

Figure 1: A convenient and comfortable place to work helps with focus and productivity. (Source: Auckland Museum.)

While you may not want to or be able to leave the house to equip your space, having a small amount of furniture or hardware delivered could help, or you could repurpose items you have.

You may also find yourself working alongside family or housemates who already work at home or are doing so for the interim. Look for tips on that in Work Alongside Others at Home, late in this chapter.

Define and Equip Your Workspace

Start with an area in which you can work. If you're already know you will be required to work at home for an extended period of time, you should think about the extent to which you can transform a space, including purchasing furniture.

If it's for a shorter period—or at least that's the initial plan—don't feel committed to remain in that space if it stretches longer.

Mark Out a Space

Where is the most sensible place in your home to work? Ostensibly, you're reading this book because you don't have a home office already set up. And most people lack a convenient empty room that's just ready to go—or any additional rooms that you had kept more carefully defined as non-work space.

If you live with other people, a room with a door is obviously ideal, even if it requires rejiggering stuff in a room that has another purpose. A separate room, however small, lets you keep work and non-work apart, and signals to other people that you're working when you're in there. It also provides at least some aural separation.

> **Tip:** Stephen Foskett, an IT expert, suggests that if you have a family that you close the door whenever you're working—when the door is closed, you're "not at home." A friend of Stephen's has a Hue remote control light in the hall to indicate whether he can be disturbed or is on a call or recording. His friend even wired it into automation tool IFTTT so that the light turns red when his Google Calendar shows he has an appointment!

If you live alone or lack that precious commodity of a room to work in, I recommend defining an area. Anything you can do to prevent endless, continuous work for yourself and to set an "at-work" space if you have roommates, a partner, or a family will improve your working life.

Set Up Your Workspace Ergonomically

Ergonomics in a workspace involves making sure all your tools fit you, rather than you contorting yourself to fit your tools. A few easy steps you can take as you configure your new working area:

- **Work at eye level:** Make sure your monitor or monitors are at eye level or slightly below. You should not crane your net up or have to crouch or crook your neck down.

- **Place your monitor at a comfortable viewing distance:** This is typically 20 to 40 inches from eye to screen. You shouldn't have to squint or move your head forward or back to read and work.

- **Set adequate lighting:** It might be time to move or buy a desk or floor lamp that illuminates your space well. Avoid glare and usually eschew overhead lighting.

- **Make your text the right size:** Modern operating systems let you increase or decrease interface element sizes. Don't use the default if they don't work for you. Here's how to change the size in Android, iPhone and iPad (iOS/iPadOS), macOS (which requires making changes in many places), and Windows 7 and Windows 10.

- **Put the keyboard at the right height and angle:** Ergonomists have studied the best angles and positions for your wrists and fingers relative to a keyboard for decades. The best current advice for most people is a position where your arms are close in to your body and your elbows are at 90°.

Sit in a Proper Chair

Those who haven't worked at home much or regularly may lack a chair designed for long periods of sitting. Office chairs can cost as little as tens of dollars from IKEA—which offers home delivery and a great return policy—and low-end office stores (**Figure 2**). The quality and comfort varies enormously. One of my favorite office chairs used to run just $50 at IKEA, and I employed versions of them for years (until I gave up on sitting while working).

Figure 2: The [IKEA Flintan](#) ($79.99) has a height adjustment, allows a sitter to lean back, and has weight-locked casters.

You can also drop hundreds to more than a thousand dollars on chairs with fancier breathable fabrics, more adjustments, and ergonomic or comfort features. But what you primarily want from a chair is simple enough. Aim for being able to have or adjust the following:

- **Feet flat on the floor:** A chair should be adjustment in height (up and down) and seat (forward and back tilt) to let you sit without compressing your thighs while your feet are on the ground.

- **Lumbar support:** Many of us—maybe all of us—need some lower-back support. Some chairs include this or have clever adjustments. You can also add an inexpensive foam pillow, designed for just this purpose. Sometimes, they're sculpted. Many makers offer them.

- **Arms don't impinge:** Avoid a chair where the arms impinge on you when you type. Some chairs, even cheaper ones, let you adjust the arms up and down or remove them altogether. You'll be using them only at rest.

- **Back angle:** Typically only fancier chairs typically let you adjust the angle of the seat back separate from the seat bottom, like a car seat. Depending on your body and comfort, this might be a must-have feature. Other chairs may lack an adjustment, but have a sprung back that lets you lean back and remain in place.

Some people find that an office-style chair with adjustments doesn't work well for them, while they are comfortable in a more standard home chair (like a dining room chair), sometimes with the addition of a lumbar pillow or seat padding. (When sitting at a dining room table, I use a "tactile cushion," which raises the seat and cushions me.)

For any kind of chair, you may want to add a footstool, which can come in fixed and adjustable varieties. You may have found the perfect chair, but your feet don't reach the ground relative to your desk or other working surface. A footstool bridges that gap.

Finally, if you work while seated at home, you might lose yourself and remain planted for hours at a time, as opposed to in an office where you have regular needs or excuses to stand. Set a timer so that every hour you stand, stretch, and look into the distance.

> **Tip:** The University of Missouri rounded up a great list of apps that can help you remember to stand and move.

A chair doesn't work for everyone, though. Some people want to stretch their legs all the time.

Stand in the Place Where You Work

You may prefer, as many people do (myself included), to stand during the working day. You may already have a standing desk or an adjustable setup in your current work space and want to replicate that at home. [Julio Ojeda-Zapata](), a technology journalist in St. Paul, Minnesota offered the following advice.

A standing desk gives you the option to work on your computer in an upright stance, which many find to be invigorating and creativity-boosting. If nothing else, it gets you up off your chair, which is bound to make your back hurt after hour upon hour of toil.

Standing desks are available in all shapes and sizes, and with a wide range of prices. Standalone models may feature a motor or use springs and counterweights that let them be raised and lowered at the push of a button or a flip of a lever. The motorized versions assume you will want to change positions throughout a day or at least regularly, and cost a pretty penny. (If you're like me, once you find the position you may never adjust it again, and you may feel silly—as I do—for spending the extra money.)

You want something simpler and more affordable at home—especially if you don't see it as a permanent arrangement. In this scenario, don't get rid of your existing, fixed work surface, but adapt it with an adjustable rig you place atop it.

Ergotron has [a line of consumer-focused converters]() that turn fixed desks into height-adjustable workspaces (**Figure 3**). These models are less expensive than the company's corporate-grade converters, but are high-quality products. These rise and lower mechanically in a jiffy.

Figure 3: Ergotron's WorkFit-TS Compact Desk Converter ($299) is one of several multi-tier adjustable platforms the company sells.

Vari, another well-regarded desk-converter seller, doesn't have a low-cost home line—but its office-class VariDesk Pro Plus 30 is affordable at $295. The company's ultracompact, highly portable VariDesk Laptop 30 stand is $175. Both models adjust via levers on either side.

For something a bit different (and more affordable), consider Readydesk's wood converters. The Readydesk 2 ($149.99) is a bookshelf-like apparatus with height-adjustable surfaces for a keyboard and a notebook or display.

The space-saving Allstand ($49.99) is a laptop stand with an angled mode for use with a tablet, sketchpad or cookbook.

Pad Your Feet

Don't forget your lower appendages! If you stand all day, you need a mat on which you stand, also called an *anti-fatigue pad*. It's a health and safety requirement in factories, and it's something you should do, too. There are many models required, some in the $100 range. Check reviews at places like New York Magazine, the Spruce Eats, and Wirecutter.

Think About the Air

Your perfect workspace—or just an adequate one—shouldn't be just about the surfaces and ergonomics. It should also be one where you're physically comfortably.

Consider the temperature of the area you're setting up. Is it warm or cool enough for you? Does air blow from a vent or air conditioner on you, and if so, is that annoying?

You may also want to add a fan for increased air circulation, open a window if the outside temperature is appropriate or you really need fresh air, or close things up and put a purifier in place.

During wildfires in and near my state in 2018, I added a [Coway AP-1512HH Mighty](#) ($230) to our house. While its HEPA filter won't capture viruses, it does significantly reduce small particles in the air, which can cause respiratory irritation.

Configure and Add Hardware

The addition of a small amount of hardware can make your home working life much better. The three key areas to focus on are audio for calls and conferencing, noise-cancelling headphones for concentration, and additional displays for more productive work.

Add Audio Options for Calls and Meetings

Some people work in offices and rarely speak to another person during the working day—it's all digital and all text. Others rely on a lot of casual in-person communication, but haven't considered how much they're actually speaking with colleagues across an average day. Still others may be on audio calls constantly or in face-to-face meetings that will be repurposed into audio or video conferences.

In nearly every case, unless you already handle a lot of audio at home, you will need to upgrade your setup. You can test out the built-in mic and speaker in your computer, smartphone, or tablet, but even the best

of these can produce only acceptable audio, and may have you straining to hear or be heard.

For the most comfort in use and in function, you can choose among four general options:

- **Headset:** A headset with over-the-head or in-ear speakers and a "boom" style mic in front of your mouth can be extremely inexpensive and dramatically improve the quality of any call you take or meeting in which you're involved. Headsets are the most comfortable option for spending hours a day talking.

- **Earbuds:** Earbuds can vary widely in quality, but you may already own a set, and as the path of least resistance and a technology you already know, it might be your best option. Earbuds can be very comfortable, but some people tire of them after a while. Remember that wireless earbuds must be charged more frequently when they're in near-constant use.

> **Use Your AirPods in Alternation**
>
> Rosemary Orchard has some smart advice for AirPods owners. If you spend most of the day on the phone, use one at a time and keep the other in the case—then when one starts to die on a call you can pop the other in, wait for a moment, and then take the low-battery one out and charge it.

- **External mic plus headphones or speaker:** A number of people have an external mic for podcasting or other audio recording. Because these mics are often very high quality and you may already have them positioned or on a swing-arm for comfortable use, just set your software input on voice- and video-conference software to use the mic as an input. You may supplement the mic with headphones or earbuds. Headphones may seem too bulky on videoconferences where everyone else has a headset. Other folks—including Take Control Books publisher Joe Kissell—rely on the built-in-speakers in their computer. Many voice apps have automatic echo cancellation, so there's no feedback.

- **Speakerphone:** You may have a memory of speakerphones offering calls full of static, people yelling to be heard, and generally unpleasant. However, we live in the future, and modern speakerphone "pucks" contain multiple microphones to offer noise cancellation and improved quality. For video conferencing, a speakerphone leaves your face and hands free.

  A model recommended by Chris Pepper, an IT manager who routinely relies engages in speakerphone calls in which he's one of several people, is the [Jabra Speak 410]($130). While it might be overkill for your solo use, it's a neat option for maximum flexibility, and it's portable—you can repurpose it later in an office or on the road.

Cancel Noise for Focus and Conversations

The closest thing to magic for my money isn't an iPad (though it comes close). No, it's noise-canceling technology. The idea is simple: one or more microphones samples sound and produces a sort of anti-noise that combines with the original audio to dampen it.

I bought my first pair of noise-canceling headphones decades ago for then-frequent plane trips, and found that while they weren't perfect, they were a huge improvement over earplugs and reduced the most wearing frequencies while reducing all ambient noise. Noise-canceling earbuds and headphones are now commonplace, and good models can be found cheaply.

> **Note:** Wearable noise-canceling devices come in active versions, described above and require battery or USB power, or passive ones that rely on cushioning selected for acoustic muffling.

Suddenly working from home may expose you to sounds that become irritating or unbearable over time: the refrigerator's hum (and its lure), traffic and street noise that penetrate through windows, the tick of a clock somewhere. Noise-canceling headphones or earbuds are great at removing those sorts of sounds almost entirely.

They can also dull the sound of talking if you're in a place in which other people (like your family or roommates) have to also function or in which there's conversation you can hear from outside your home workspace.

Combined with music, they work even better. The music is effectively enhanced by the absence of background noise, and you can "step into" a concert hall, arena, or small chamber in a way that's often a shocking displacement when you first encounter it.

Many people prefer over-the-ear headphones for comfort when wearing for long periods, for the noise reduction they add due to the ear pads that surround your ears. A bonus of headphones is that they visibly communicate to others that you are in a working zone.

I am a fan of the low-cost Sony ZX110NC Noise-Canceling Headphones ($39.99). They rely on a single AAA battery, and offer dozens of hours on a single charge of a rechargeable cell. They also fold compactly.

You can spend a lot more to get greater comfort and better cancellation, as well as additional features, like a mic and a way to pause noise cancelation by holding a hand over the outside of one speaker. Wirecutter has its usual broad round-up, with options from $28 to $400.

However, others find the ear constriction unpleasant and prefer in-ear earbuds. Options seem endless for wired and wireless battery-powered models. This includes Apple's updated AirPods Pro ($249).

There's a third option, too, which are earbuds that are held in place through an eyeglasses-like hanger on top, sometimes called "earhooks" (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4: These Deific Design IXP7 "earhooks" work for people who don't want headphones or earbuds.

Tip: Rosemary Orchard notes that if noise cancellation doesn't work for you (or doesn't work all the time), you might consider a white-noise app, which generates light static that some people find comforting and not distracting. She prefers [Dark Noise](#).

Tip: [Daniel Pourhadi](#), a smartphone software developer, offered up slightly different advice: "I like to have the TV on in the background, often a series I've seen many times before." He likes to remind people that we shouldn't feel constrained by broad advice as "everyone is different (some of us more than others)."

Have a Soundtrack for Your Work

Writer and photographer [Kirk McElhearn](#), author of [*Take Control of macOS Media Apps*](#), says that music is important to him, helping him with motivation. He notes that it can put you in the mood to take on long tasks in an unfamiliar environment. Here's his advice:

"Whether it's your own music or playlists from a streaming service, you have a wide range of options to accompany you throughout the day. Maybe start with something mellow in the morning, when you're sitting in front of the computer, checking email, and planning your day as you sip your first cup of tea or coffee. Then, when you have a project that requires more attention, choose some music with a beat, something that can drive you onward.

"As you take breaks, you may want to tone things down, or even pause the music. But when you need inspiration, put on some of your favorite tunes to help you think. If you're not used to listening to music at work, you'd be surprised how effective it can be.

"But don't think you should play music all day long. While it can mask some of the ambient sounds that you're not used to hearing when you work, it can also numb you over time. Take some silent breaks; listen to the sounds around you. Some sounds may seem like noise, but if you're in a suburban or rural environment, you'll also have birds chirping that can remind you that you don't need to focus intensely for the entire day."

You may have a music library of your own that meets your needs, but you can also check out free, trial, and paid services like Spotify, Apple Music, and Pandora. If you have an Amazon Prime subscription, it includes access to [a 2-million song music library](#). And Spotify Premium is included as part of [an AT&T Unlimited &More package](#).

As with all advice in this book, your mileage will vary: some people cannot stand to hear music while working or can only tolerate it while performing certain tasks.

Extend Your View with Another Monitor

A laptop display or a single monitor on a desktop computer may seem good enough for a few minutes or hours here or there. But modern

software apps and the combination of programs and browser tabs you may to need to consult all at once benefit from multiple displays.

You also may be used to two (or more) monitors at work and want to replicate that setup at home.

First, check your equipment. Can you add a second display? Nearly any laptop or desktop computer purchased in the last several years has one or more plugs to add a monitor via HDMI, DisplayPort, or Thunderbolt 1 or 2. Many devices released since 2015 added USB-C or Thunderbolt 3, which work with multiple monitor standards. If you don't recognize ports, go to the manufacturer's web site to look up specifications.

> **Tip:** Some less-expensive laptops—such as Google Chromebooks—may be unable to add a second desktop on an external display, but will let you attach a larger or higher-resolution external monitor that mirrors (is identical to) the main laptop display. You can often get the main display to blank itself when you have the external monitor attached or close the lid on the laptop without putting it to sleep.

Second, can you free enough space in the area you've set up to work in to add the monitor and get it to the right height, as discussed earlier?

Third, is it worth it to drop the money? That may be the easiest question to answer, because you can consult your budget—or your workplace may be willing to underwrite part or all of it. Some high-quality displays are extremely inexpensive now.

You can purchase a well-reviewed, bright 1080p monitor (1920 by 1080 pixels) for around $100. Look for a monitor with IPS (in-plane switching), which retains LED apparent brightness from many angles instead of at perfectly perpendicular viewing, for the maximum flexibility in placement and angle for your purposes. A perfectly good 4K display (3840 by 2160 pixels) costs between about $250 and $400.

> **Tip:** Remember to check on cables before ordering: some monitors come with no cables or just one particular type, even if they have two or three forms they support. If you have a USB-C or Thunderbolt 3 port, you may need a DisplayPort or HDMI adapter, which are inexpensive but vary in quality—read reviews carefully.

If cost, space, or other reasons prohibit a second display and you have an iPad, you may be able to use software to let your iPad act as another screen, Rosemary Orchard advises:

- **Sidecar in macOS 10.15:** If you're using 10.15 (Catalina) on a Mac and you have an iPad running iPadOS 13, you can use Sidecar, a free feature. Apple has a lengthy FAQ about using it.

- **Extend a Mac with an iPad:** Luna Display ($49.99) also turns your iPad into another screen, but works with versions of macOS and iOS/iPadOS starting about seven years ago and even older Macs and iPads.

- **Extend Mac or Windows with a tablet or Chromebook:** Duet Display ($9.99) lets you extend either desktop platform with an iPad, iPhone, Android device, or Chromebook. Support dates back several years for operating systems and devices. You can other features, like remote desktop access, with a subscription.

> **Get the Right Glasses**
>
> This might not be the perfect time for a visit to the optometrist, but if it's possible, it could save you from headaches and let you work a full day without pain. Architectural photographer Stephen Schafer notes that some people need different glasses (or may need glasses for the first time) to view an external monitor when they're used to working from a laptop.
>
> Schafer has a set of glasses with a reading prescription—as do I, as I'm far-sighted—but he notes that you should consult with an optometrist about distances. If you will work close to a laptop and far from an external display, one set of glasses might cause migraines or stress, while two optimized sets could create ease.

Upgrade Broadband and Wi-Fi Networks

For those used to working casually at home and otherwise using a residential network for personal reasons, you might find that you need more than you have for constant calls, file transfers, and videoconferencing. Writer Julio Ojeda-Zapata notes that now is a terrific time to scrutinize your online setup. This includes your choice of internet provider, how much you are paying for their services, and whether the internet gear in your home is up to date.

Julio has several suggestions to improve your network and throughput:

* **Do you have the right provider?** If you have more than one internet service provider in your area (sadly, not everyone does), compare what each has to offer. Home workers may find that a high-speed downstream connection that works great for HDTV video streaming is paired with a low upload speed that can't handle bidirectional video or file uploads and sync with work. You may be able to get your current provider to bump your plan up or you might need to switch.

Note: Sometimes it's as easy as a call to get your broadband speed changed, requiring a rep to press a button and change the billing, or new service can be installed in a central place in a building. Other times, you might need a service person to come out and wire something inside your home. With active contagion, the latter might be inadvisable or impossible.

* **Lose the cap:** Some ISPs impose a limit on how much data you can use each month, after which you are throttled to a lower speed, cut off, or pay overage fees. You should talk to your ISP about their current policy and decide whether it's worth raising the cap if it costs money—and whether your work would pick that cost up. Some ISPs may also disable caps during the pandemic.

  AT&T and CenturyLink were the first ISPs to announce (in mid-March) they are removing limits for all customers through the outbreak. Other home broadband and wireless companies have followed with various offers. The FCC may also order caps removed.

- **Are you paying too much?** If a friend or colleague is paying less for the same service you have, don't be shy about asking for a price match. You'll probably get it. I called the fiber ISP I had subscribed to for years after fellow Take Control author Jeff Carlson told me he had just signed up—and paid $30 less per month. One call later, and I was saving almost $400 a year. Companies may be particularly sympathetic to the home worker right now, and happy to help you as part of genuine corporate efforts to improve customers' lives.

- **Update your broadband gear.** Broadband providers typically equip their users with rental routers but are not always as interested in swapping out gear that goes out of date. If you are not sure, ask your provider to check. This is especially important if your broadband router is also a Wi-Fi router that provides wireless internet access within your home. Wi-Fi technology is continually evolving, so make sure your provider's gear is up to the job. Because this gear is typically shipped from a central office, you can receive it with minimal or no person-to-person interaction.

- **Time to update your Wi-Fi gear?** If you're making do with an old wireless router that doesn't provide good coverage everywhere, consider a mesh system, where each router acts as a wireless node that automatically finds all the others. Almost no configuration is needed and it can dramatically improve coverage and sometimes speed. Consult [TechHive](#) and [Wirecutter](#) for reviews. You might also consider upgrading an older 802.11n router to the newer 802.11ac flavor. These newer models are not very expensive and can increase the coverage and throughput across your network. (I wrote about this subject in *[Take Control of Wi-Fi Networking and Security](#)*.)

Set Boundaries and Preserve Professionalism

With the sudden imposition of remote work, coupled with the potential for partners, housemates, children, and parents to also be in isolation, you need to be able to set the same kind of boundaries that home workers have defined for decades.

If we learned anything from the best video of a few years ago, when a man [Skyping in to the BBC](#) to speak on important international issues had his young daughter dance in behind him—followed by a baby… followed by his partner…followed by their chaotic exit—it's that you need to figure out how to retain an air of professionalism, even if everything is in shambles around you (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5: An accidental toddler intrusion is inevitable. How you react is the key issue.

People generally understand if you're working from home, things can go wrong—especially at the moment, when so many people have never been regular telecommuters before.

In this chapter, consider how to set a working "mode," think about dealing with interruptions and family or housemate needs, and working alongside others who have already been working for home or are likewise thrust into that role with you.

And your employer or coworkers may want a certain level of formality and professionalism to provide clearer communication and for efficiency. You can make that happen, even when toddlers lurk nearby ready to photobomb.

Indicate You're at Work

When starting fresh with telecommuting, creating barriers between you and other people in the place you're working can be key. Make your expectations known:

- **Have a conversation:** Sit down with roommates or family members to talk about how you plan to work. This can help them understand what you need, and they may raise reasonable objections or have positive advice that improves your plan.

- **Set working hours:** Having a routine set of time that you're at work—hours that could even be posted—makes it easier for everyone around you to know when you're on or off the clock.

- **Use signage or signals:** An "at work" or "do not disturb" sign that you put on a door or near you makes your status clear. If you have a door, close it. Wearing headphones, especially noise-canceling ones—see Cancel Noise for Focus and Conversations—can also be an excellent signifier.

The author of *The Calculating Stars*, Mary Robinette Kowal, has a downloadable PDF containing a sign you can print out and attach to a laptop with a clothespin (**Figure 6**). The sign can be rotated to read "Writing," "Other Work," and "Goofing Off." It's a low-tech way to indicate clearly what your work status is.
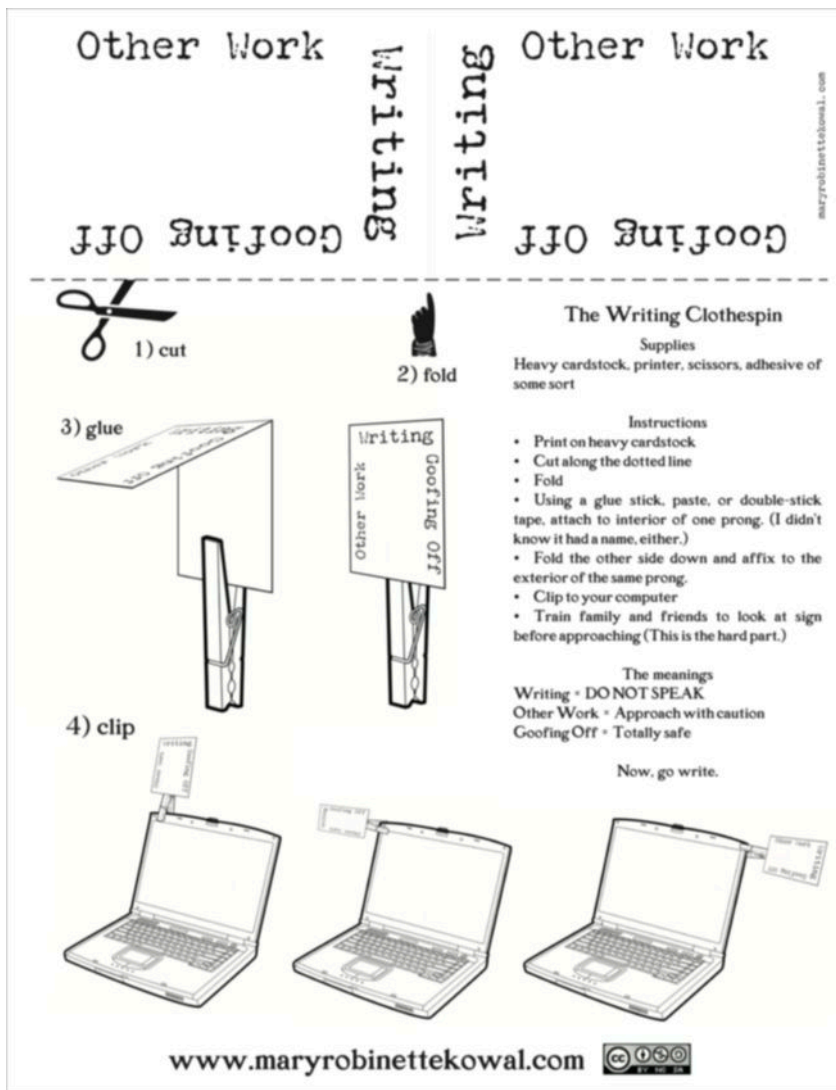
Other Work   Writing   Writing   Other Work

Goofing Off   Goofing Off

maryrobinettekowal.com

1) cut

2) fold

3) glue

Writing

Other Work   Goofing Off

4) clip

The Writing Clothespin

Supplies

Heavy cardstock, printer, scissors, adhesive of some sort

Instructions

- Print on heavy cardstock
- Cut along the dotted line
- Fold
- Using a glue stick, paste, or double-stick tape, attach to interior of one prong. (I didn't know it had a name, either.)
- Fold the other side down and affix to the exterior of the same prong.
- Clip to your computer
- Train family and friends to look at sign before approaching (This is the hard part.)

The meanings

Writing = DO NOT SPEAK
Other Work = Approach with caution
Goofing Off = Totally safe

Now, go write.

www.maryrobinettekowal.com

Figure 6: Kowal's sign is a great template to work from in creating your work indicator.

Jason Snell, the host and impresario of The Incomparable podcast network and creator of the Six Colors tech news site, switched a few years ago from a daily commute to full-time home-based entrepreneurship. He said his biggest suggestion was to "set rules":

"My family is aware what it means when the door to my office is open, when it's closed, and when it's closed and I've put a do-not-disturb on the door. Initially we had a lot of awkward social interactions about when I'm available to be interrupted, and it's taken some working out."

He notes that is wife texts him if she's at home and the door is closed. "If the door is open, she walks in but doesn't start talking, so I can finish what I'm doing. It takes time but it's very useful if you talk about what different signals mean and when you're interruptible."

You may also want to set up a check-in system with your office or coworkers that let them know when you "arrive" and "leave" the office, and when you're on break.

In some cases, that's as simple as setting an "away" status to "available" in a chat or group messaging program. In others, you might be asked or want to text or otherwise check in.

Some companies and workgroups like to do a quick check-in, often with a timer set, in which everyone is standing and they just do a fast go-round before starting the day. That might now migrate to video.

Note: You *should* take breaks (see Take Breaks) and also take full advantage of noting when you're not at work and keeping that time distinct (see Preserve Time Outside of Work). A lot of the time in a workplace, you give yourself or are offered downtime that you might think you don't deserve at home.

Consider Your Hours

Work hours in an office, regular or occasional work-from-home hours, and the new telecommuting regime can all be different. Every office and job will be different, but you should fight to retain a similar amount of work while home as you had the office—excluding your commute time, which I'll discuss in a later chapter in Preserve Time Outside of Work.

You may need to shift hours to better fit a new schedule at work or to sync up with others whose work times have now shifted. And you may feel the need to demonstrate your commitment to work by racking up hours. Setting and trying to enforce an expected schedule can be a dance with your office, but it's one you should have explicit conversations about, rather than being subject to unsaid ones.

Set a Business Standard

As a freelancer, I haven't needed to wear trousers for most of the last 25 years. However, in more practical terms, I like getting up, showering, and getting dressed in something I would feel comfortable leaving the house in.

I heard from many, many office workers and long-time freelancers alike that clothes can make the person—or profession! In fact, the most frequent advice I received was like this from technology journalist Dwight Silverman: "I think it's really important to *get dressed*. Wear pants, a shirt, socks and some kind of shoes. (Bedroom slippers if you don't wear shoes in the house.) Gets you in a more disciplined mindset than if you sit around in your PJs."

That doesn't, however, require wearing a three-piece suit (**Figure 7**).

Figure 7: [Doonesbury from May 9, 1979](#)—Garry Trudeau was always ahead of his time. Here, characters discuss the sartorial choices of a political advisor of President Jimmy Carter.

The flip side is, however, also valid, when you consider you mental health and general well-being:

- Do you need the comfort of being out of office work to assuage your fears? Great, wear sweatpants.

- You don't need to wear pants or a skirt unless you're doing video conferencing where your entire body is visible (**Figure 8**).

Figure 8: If we re-examine this BBC guest's environment more carefully, we can see all the signs of a regular home worker trying to make a spare bedroom appear professional for video calls.

More generally, the more you can simulate your work experience at home, the better for preserving a routine and potentially meeting expectations. The last thing you need is for a boss to question your ability to function from home when you have no choice but to do so.

Work Alongside Others at Home

For many people, the decision or requirement to work from home for a job normally handled at a place of business has an impact beyond themselves. You may have a spouse, partner, roommates, children, or extended family. Some or all of them may have already been working for home or at home during the day—as with young children, people on non-standard shifts/workdays, and retired people.

Adding yourself to the mix can be stressful on top of the health circumstances that have led to it.

Jeff Carlson, author of *Take Control of Your Digital Photos*, advises that you're going to have boundary scuffles and that's okay. "You may not be used to being around someone for so much time all week, and it's fine if you don't talk all day, or you check in once in a while.

"We work in the same upstairs office, our backs to each other—it's a small converted attic, and our desks face opposite walls—so we do a pretty good job of ignoring each other and doing our own work. We also chat on Slack or Messenger, even though we're four feet apart. And for me, headphones are a must."

Brittney Bush Bollay, an urban environmental advocate, and her partner work from home full time. She said they had to establish clear expectations about each person's need for space and time during the day to avoid disrupting each other's concentration and work flow.

Some additional tips:

- Consider the aural impact and the line of sight for distraction when setting up workspaces. Planning is great, but flexibility in making changes is key.

- If you can stagger some working hours with a flexible employer, you may be able to avoid conflicting needs in the same workspace.

- Figure out a protocol, especially with non-romantic cohabitants, about resolving differences ahead of time. "That's the way I do it!" or "I'm not making very much noise" will very quickly wear thin.

Cope with the Vagaries of Home Life

Home life will intrude on work, especially in homes with children off school. Dogs will bark, cats will jump on the keyboard while you're away and send "j12h3ldbn09 80983n4a;" to co-workers, and, yes, toddlers may burst through a door during important client meetings.

Businesses are going to have to cope with this as much as you do. Bosses that expect that you can lock the rest of the household away—some of whom will *also* be working from—so that they don't interrupt your work day will be in a state of constant apoplexy.

As [Natalie Nagele noted on Twitter](#), "Managers: please give your folks permission to be unproductive. This isn't normal. The extra cognitive load is not easily pushed back."

Let's finish with a smart thought from Tiffany Baxendell Bridge, a technical account engineer: "When your co-worker's curious child comes to peek at the camera, be sure to smile and wave. Parents feel like they have to hide their kids when their childcare falls through, so be welcoming and watch the parents on your team exhale."

Learn Remote Tools

You may already be familiar with many software tools designed for collaborative work and communication for people who work side by side and far apart. However, you will likely rely on these far more than you have in the past, while some may be entirely new.

The primary tools you will likely need to start using or use more heavily are remote collaboration apps, typically web-based, for working on documents and spreadsheets; group communications apps for live conversations with searchable archives; and audio- and video-conference tools to create virtual one-on-one and group meetings.

But let's start with securing your connection.

Enable a Virtual Private Network

Larger companies typically require that remote workers connect via a VPN, which is a special encrypted tunnel between any computing device—a laptop, desktop, smartphone, or tablet—and a VPN server at the company's office, headquarters, or data center.

By encrypting all data passing to and from your devices, this prevents anyone else from snooping on the contents, even if they have access to your home network or any point between you and your company's VPN server.

> **Note:** Most websites and online services now rely on HTTPS or similar encrypted sessions for all traffic, which are in effect a limited-purpose VPN between your software (like a browser or email client) and a server. But not all sites and services are properly encrypted; the VPN solves this by wrapping everything up in a scrambled bow.

If you company doesn't have its own corporate VPN, you can get some of the security benefits by using a VPN service that encrypts data from your device to a data center somewhere on the Internet. This often is

the most vulnerable part. And many remote company resources you access will have their own encryption layered on top of that. For suggestions about VPNs to use or to suggest to a small company to subscribe to, see reviews at Wirecutter and at Macworld.

Even companies that rely on VPNs may be overwhelmed if they suddenly have thousands or tens of thousands of workers requiring them, and it might take days to activate your account and configure sufficient capacity. They may allow or advise you to use a personal VPN in the meantime.

> **Tip:** You can also use a VPN to separate your business and non-business usage. Use the VPN when you're on company time; turn it off on personal time.

Collaborate Online on Projects

Fortunately, we are well into a golden age of web-based tools for massive, remote, group collaboration. If your company has more than a handful of employees, you may already have standardized on one of the online suites.

However, current circumstances may find those tools inadequate to your needs or your working groups, and companies may give you more leeway than typical to set up short-term solutions that keep you working instead of bound to something that doesn't fit the bill.

The two main options for business software suites are G Suite from Google and Microsoft 365. Both include a word processor, spreadsheet, and presentation app; meeting and chat or group-discussion software; and other programs and services. Service is priced per user, per month.

Google effectively requires that you work in a browser for most features and tools, though for most document work you can download elements and function without an active internet connection.

Tip: Although the G Suite apps aren't as powerful as the full Microsoft Office suite, they're entirely suitable for many collaboration needs, according to Adam Engst, the publisher of the veteran online publication TidBITS. He notes that TidBITS's online publication relies heavily on Google Docs for writing and editing all of its articles, and all of its freelancers and staff work remotely.

Microsoft lets you download apps or work in a browser, depending on the software. Both let you invite collaborators, control their access (such as directly editing, commenting or marking suggestions, and just viewing), and download or export documents in different formats for interchanging elsewhere.

Tip: For Mac, iPhone, and iPad-only workgroups, you can turn to iCloud for online collaboration with Pages, Numbers, and Keynote. These sync among macOS, iOS, and iPadOS versions, and can be used entirely via the web. Non-Apple users can participate via the icloud.com website, too, without having native software on a device.

Google and Microsoft just scrape the surface of what's out there: Trello, Asana, Airtable, Miro, Igloo, Happeo, monday.com, Hive, Quip, and many many others. Your company may already have picked one, or you might be appointed or volunteer to find the right mix of feature and price for your workgroup or firm. Some have generous trials, as long as 30 days, which may be enough to figure out if one fits your needs or for the duration of everyone working away from the office.

Message in a Group

It's a very broad category, but group messaging includes any method by which three or more people communicate, often with a search and archive component. You may already use text messages, Apple iMessage (with the Messages app), or WhatsApp. However, these are more ephemeral and intended for more informal interaction.

Microsoft Teams and Slack are environments that create a persistent set of what are effectively chat rooms, called channels, in which invited

participants can communicate. (You might enjoy my book on the latter product, *Take Control of Slack*.)

You can talk all together, start a private conversation with one or more people, and search past messages. Voice and video calling and screen sharing are also included. The platforms can be extended with plugins and conduits that connect to other software, like Dropbox storage and Zoom videoconferencing. (Teams also includes a bunch of other Microsoft apps and services.)

> **Tip:** User-experience expert Dylan Wilbanks offered this advice for new work-from-homers about not being too dependent on text-based messaging: "Communication is crucial, and it's important to communicate well, because you'll be sending more emails and Slack messages while not being able to just walk over to someone's desk. Don't be afraid to make a phone call or get on a videoconference to help with creating clarity, especially in the beginning."

Your company may already have picked one of the above, and you may have to request access to have an account created. In some organizations, Slack or Teams is the main or only way that colleagues collaborate as well as the shared repository of files.

> **Tip:** Microsoft Teams is part of its business subscription offerings. Ask your company to check whether Teams may be available but not yet in use.

If you don't have access to either system or your company doesn't use one, both Teams and Slack have generous free tiers of service that include most services you would need in the short run. This includes all text-based features and one-on-one voice and video calls; Teams additionally includes screen sharing. Total group storage of uploaded files is limited.

Paid tiers add options, including group voice and video calls (with screen sharing) and large limits on per-user or per-group file uploads.

Communicate with Video

Videoconferencing was invented decades ago with expensive and funky equipment. Now, every laptop and most desktop computers come equipped with a camera, and many, many software packages let you communicate one-on-one or in a group conversation with people.

Start with making sure you're ready to talk to people who can see you and where you're at, and then let's dig into software options.

Set Up for Video

There's nothing more terrifying to those of us who *aren't* routinely videoconferencing than having to start using it! A few years ago, I had a contract job in which there were regular video meetings. I wound up making a number of changes in my work area to make it look tidy and professional and so I felt less embarrassed to be on camera—realizing that nobody else particularly cared about my space or appearance.

Here are a few tips that can help:

- **Use a computer:** While you can videoconference from a smartphone or tablet, the results are often poor. The front-facing cameras on mobile devices have typically been lower quality and work worse in low-light conditions. Try to have a computer handy. However, if you need to use a smartphone or tablet, consider getting or rigging a small stand to hold it fixed in a horizontal position.

- **Add a backdrop:** Is your area too messy or busy, or full of your personal life? Set up a backdrop. I bought an inexpensive curtain rod, mounted it to the ceiling, and clip a cheap plain white or black photography backdrop to it. Some backdrops are designed to velcro on to a chair to act like a peacock tail behind you. You can get fancier—or weirder—and buy a backdrop of books on shelves or other decoration, also often very low cost (**Figure 9**). Bonus: This can double as a room divider!

Figure 9: This backdrop from LYWYGG is just $19.98 (stand not included), and makes you look like a CNN guest.

- **Change the lights:** Lighting may not be ideal. In fact, it probably isn't. At my workspace, my face is entirely blown out unless I tweak the placement of lights. Search on retailers for "selfie rings," which are simple rings of LEDs designed to cast a glow on your face. Some clip on to a laptop top or monitor, others come with a small stand. You'll be ready for your close-up.

- **Consider a better webcam:** The camera installed in your computer is free to use—if one is built in—but you still might want to upgrade, as those built-in cameras can be of poor quality. You can spend from a few tens of dollars to a couple hundred for a camera that bumps up quality enormously. Some have a mic built in, too.

Want a Top-of-the-Line Webcam?

MetaFilter founder and emoji wrangler [Matt Haughey](#) tested oodles of options for a webcam to improve his video meetings. He says he decided that's the [Logitech Brio](#) ($199). It's the crème de la crème, and solves several problems through its design.

The Brio can capture up to 4K, overkill for most videoconferencing, but perfect for using its optical zoom in 1080p mode—the extra resolution lets you effectively zoom in by cropping the image. It has three fields of view you can choose from, from tight-in to broad. And it has a sensor to color correct automatically based on lighting.

Don't Use Video (Wait, What?)

If you don't want to use video, I hope you're in a working environment where you can stand up for yourself and state that. It might be entirely inappropriate in your home space or you may have avoided it up until now and prefer not to use it—or only certain times of day or with certain video calls work. Don't assume you have to be on video.

A secondary option when you can't say no is to use built-in background blurring features available for some hardware or services, such as in Skype. You may need a particular app, smartphone, or camera to employ that.

Look at Videoconferencing Software

Videoconferencing software you're most likely to encounter include Apple FaceTime, Google Hangouts (business and free tiers). Microsoft Skype (business and free tiers), Microsoft Teams (paid tiers), Slack (paid tiers), and Zoom.

Tip: Always check before starting a session that your camera and audio are set to the devices you want and are working. Audio and USB in particular sometimes decide abruptly not to work together. You might need time to restart a computer and have it be finished with that task.

Apple FaceTime

Apple's [FaceTime](#) audio and video chat software works only on the company's hardware: Macs, iPhones, iPads, and iPod touch devices. It requires the FaceTime apps, which is pre-installed on all Apple devices. FaceTime is free to use.

FaceTime can [handle up 32 people](#) in an audio or video chat if all participants updated their OS since January 2019. Previous versions allowed one-on-one video or up to nine people in an audio call.

Apple also offers [Keynote Live](#) for presentations, which can accept up to 100 people viewing a presentation at the same time via Keynote software or a browser (no software or account needed). Voiceover audio isn't offered; you have to deliver that separately.

Google Hangouts

[Google Hangouts](#) is available as an app and in via several browsers via a plugin. It allows audio and video conferencing and screen sharing.

It comes in [two flavors](#):

- Classic Hangouts can handle up to 25 participants. Both a free, consumer version and a paid version in G Suite are available.

- Hangouts Meet for G Suite can allow 100 to 250 people in a video-conference, depending on the paid tier of service.

Microsoft Skype

[Skype](#) is a long-running piece of software that used to be entirely focused on consumers. Now it's morphed a bit into hybrid of personal and corporate use, though all flavors offer multi-person audio and videoconferencing and screen sharing. It's available as a native app on all major platforms and as a web plugin for Google Chrome and Microsoft Edge.

Skype comes in three versions:

- Plain ol' Skype is free and allows calls with up to 10 people using a mix of audio and video.

- Skype for Business connects up to 250 people with high-definition video, virtual white-board sharing, and other collaborative features. It's $2 per month or included with Office 365 subscriptions.

- Skype Meetings is a kind of free tier of Skype for Business. It offers the same features for up to three users—but for the first 60 days, you can have up to 10 users, so you can see how useful that is before you're throttled.

Microsoft Teams

Teams include audio and video chat and screen sharing for up to 250 users with its paid tiers. Online events can handles 10,000 attendees.

Slack

While Slack is largely a group-communication app, it includes multi-person audio and video conferencing with screen-sharing and some whiteboard features in its paid tiers. (For more insight, see my book *Take Control of Slack*.)

Audio and video calls can have up to 15 people. The Slack native apps for all major platforms can be used as well as Google Chrome.

Zoom

The video-conferencing service Zoom has a very generous free tier, which may suffice for ad hoc or temporary use for many workgroups and small-to-medium size businesses. It also has very modest pricing for paid tiers. You have to use an app with Zoom for video, but apps are available for all major platforms. Audio participants can use the app or use a regular call-in phone number, including at the free tier. The host can record a Zoom call directly within the app.

> **Note:** Zoom's usage has skyrocketed during the pandemic, and the company said it may have to limit the use of call-in numbers for free users because of scarcity. The phone system is very brittle, and adding a lot of numbers takes time.

The free tier can host up 100 participants, which seems like a lot, but I've been on Zoom calls with about 60 people, and it's surprisingly

manageable. This include high-definition video. Meetings can't last more than 40 minutes, though you can immediately start another meeting and invite people to that.

The Pro paid tier is $14.99 per month for each host—there's no charge per-participant. The limit is still up to 100 people, but meetings can last up to 24 hours and more administrative controls are available.

Tip: If you work in K–12 education, the company may have already lifted the limited on a Basic account from 40 minutes to 24 hours. If your account wasn't already given this outbreak-related upgrade, contact the company.

Business and Enterprise tiers are $19.99 per month per host and offer somewhat more features. Business plans have to have at least 10 paying hosts and can features up to 300 participants per call; Enterprise plans require 50 or more hosts, and can manage up to 500 people in a session.

Pace Yourself

This is a hard time and it may remain difficult for a while. It's important to your long-term well-being that you treat your current work-from-home situation as the beginning of marathon, not a sprint. I don't say that to be depressing: It's actually a great thing from a public-health standpoint and your own biological health to be mostly isolated while pandemic rages.

Because that's the reality of the situation, try to ease yourself into your new working situation. Bosses and employers may or may not be understanding, but we're already seeing the pressure of social media in forcing companies to change initially restrictive policies.

Maybe you get a fraction of what you normally get done in your first week, and ramp back toward normal efficiency in the second. Or you might find remote work freeing, and you're radically happier and more productive—and may be able to argue for a change for yourself (or even switch jobs) when the global crisis winds down.

Cut Yourself Some Slack

[Jeff Porten](), author of [*Take Control of Your Productivity*](), wanted to emphasize that people should take it easy on themselves in this transition. He notes, "You're going to feel horribly unproductive at first. It's likely not true." People are generally very poor at estimating productive parts of their working day unless they have to keep a billing record or a detailed time sheet.

It's possible one-third of your time at work is unproductive. But because you're "at work," he says, it *feels* like you worked eight hours. At home that's going to feel like five.

Jeff advises, "Watch your accomplishments, not your time. Be ruthless evaluating how much you got done at your workplace when you compare. Most of the time, most people stress the hell out when really, they're only slightly off the mark."

Pacing is key across all this, starting with how you manage your day and how you briefly stop working. Your regular hours may not work from home, so consider whether they can change. And, vitally, set a line between work and non-work, especially if you regain time by losing a commute.

Structure Your Day

You can find a vast amount of advice in books and on websites about techniques for breaking your work day or projects into approachable pieces, offering you structure that might otherwise have been provided in a work environment. What's wonderful is that anything you learn at this stage will pay dividends in the future, no matter where you're physically performing your job.

Set Sprints

Many, many people swear by *sprints*, where you define a period of time and work intently or intensively—depending on the task and your personality—at which point you break.

One of the best-known variants on this is the Pomodoro Technique, named for the tomato (*pomodoro* in Italian) timer that its developer Francesco Cirillo cited in the early 1990s.

It's simple: Define a task. Set a timer for 25 minutes. When it goes off, note that (as simply as making a check on a piece of paper), and take a break of around five minutes. After three or four sprints, take a longer break. Do what you can to eliminate distractions during each sprint.

You can use other periods of the time for interruptive activities, like checking email and working across multiple windows and devices. Or you can turn those into sprints, too.

Sprints don't work for everyone! Some people like to get into a state of flow and carry out a task for hours on end, sometimes forgetting to eat and drink during that period. I know that laying out pages of a magazine or book can put me into that sort of mode, and many writers,

artists, and programmers are generally familiar with that kind of productive fugue state. You don't have to fight it if it works for you.

Turn Off Distractions

You will want to disable distractions to focus during sprints or flows of work. Here are a number of ways to help with that:

- Use the "do not disturb" feature common in most operating systems. With this feature, nearly all notifications, pop-ups, bings, pings, and bleeps stop.

- Where feasible, stick to one app at a time to avoid context changes that can interrupt your thinking unless it's part of a workflow that you can use seamlessly and comfortably.

- Use the full-screen mode on a window so that it occupies the entire display. If that's not useful for formatting or puts too much white space in front of you, hide all apps except the one you're using.

- Install software on a desktop computer that can let you set a timer to block all social media or other categories of software or even turn off internet access entirely for a period of time. One of the earliest examples of such software is [Freedom](#), which is available for nearly every operating system and browser.

Several people suggested one change in particular all the time: disable automatic email retrieval, quit your mail app, or disable notifications.

Writer [Antony Johnston](#), whose graphic novel *The Coldest City* was turned into the movie *Atomic Blonde*, said: "Unless replying to emails is literally your job (e.g., customer support, etc.) then *do not* leave your email app open all the time. Open it only when you actually want to check and reply to mails; otherwise close it down. You'll immediately experience less distraction."

Co-Work Remotely

Even though you're apart from your co-workers, you can still have some quiet company. You can certainly use people who you *don't* work with, either, who are also now working from home.

App-developer strategic consultant Aleen Simms said that she works with a friend and colleague this way during normal work-from-home periods. They have the video on and microphones muted. They check in at regular intervals, synchronizing sprints and discussing what they're about to do. This provides accountability to someone else and is a well-liked tactic for people with ADHD.

Various videoconferencing apps can be used either one-on-one or to create a quiet virtual room of people. One person with a paid Zoom account can create an open "room" that people can enter and leave through the day (see Communicate with Video). It also lets you know at a glance if someone's available or busy if you need to consult with them.

Take Breaks

When you're working, you should be working *all the time*, right? That's what work is? Wrong, wrong, and, for good measure, wrong. While humans seem to be optimized for "occupation"—doing something, anything, for some of the day—we're also creatures who need rest, a break, and down time. Even a little helps a lot.

As noted above, the Pomodoro Technique is structured around many short breaks and some longer ones. If you don't want to adopt that approach directly, you can still set a timer so that at a regular interval or after a certain period of time from whenever you start it, you remember to stop what you're doing.

You have a million options for what to do, but home workers focused on a computer or mobile device in particular need to move around:

- Stand up, stretch, and walk around.

- If it's safe to be outside, which it almost certainly will be, leave the house: stand on a balcony, take a walk while avoiding coming too close to other people, breathe fresh air.

- Have solo dance parties.

- Engage in brief yoga, aikido, tai chi (and drink chai tea), or other body work, even if it's just a two-minute or five-minute stretch.

- Meditate.

- Read a few pages of something for pleasure.

- Make lunch or have a snack.

- Make coffee, tea, or another beverage.

With a wireless headset, you might be able walk around while on conference calls or speaking with colleagues and clients. If you have a cat, you can devote time to playing with it (if it will be awake at the time you need, which of course it never will be). Own a dog? It's time for a walk.

Tonya Engst, co-founder of TidBITS Publishing, reminds us that instead of eating from a food truck or grabbing sandwiches for lunch, we can prepare a meal. "Many people will still want to eat fast," she notes, "But think how much time you'll save by not commuting—then use that time to cook."

Shift Hours

If your workplace is amenable, you may try to split up your work or shift hours. Some businesses thrive on live access to coworkers; others are task-based or driven by independent initiative. If you can work far better by starting work at 5 P.M. and working until 1 A.M.—by sleeping later with the support of partner, family, nanny, or kids who can take care of their own morning—why not?

You might also be able to use an adjusted daily schedule to go for a long walk, a run, or a bike ride at a time that's ideal when working from home but otherwise infeasible.

Some people might thrive with "four 10s" (four 10-hour days a week) to mesh with other people's or home schedules. Others might want "three 13s," in which you do long 13-hour days, but work just six days in any 14-day period. (It's common in some professions, like nursing.)

You might also want to trade weekend days for weekdays, since the distinction between the two may be blurred right now. Figure out what might work best, and talk to your employer about whether it's possible.

Preserve Time Outside of Work

Two unique situations arise from suddenly becoming a remote worker. First, if you had a commute of more than a few minutes, the time you regain can be significant. I know many people who have a 90- or 120-minute round-trip commute every day—if all the buses, ferries, and trains run on time.

Some people do enjoy their commute: they bike or walk part of it, they like listening to podcasts or music or reading while en route, or they use some of the time to get a start on the day on email or other work so they feel less harried when they arrive at their place of business. They lose those benefits, and will have to adjust.

Other folks—I think most—have a commute longer than they want or they don't want a commute at all. The time returned is a gift.

Dylan Wilbanks advises, "Use the extra time to do things you wouldn't be able to do with your commute. Make yourself breakfast. Make coffee or tea. Take a walk. Do yoga. Read a book. You have the time now."

Second, and partly as a consequence, your work might be even more likely to try to erode the space between work and non-work. With the loss of a commute, your company or boss might decide that's time that you "owe back" to working hours.

Poppycock!

As I advise throughout the book, it's more important than ever to set boundaries with your employer, though I know that it can be fraught to fight back, especially when companies will be under extraordinary stress and layoffs may be common. Nonetheless, you have a right to yourself to your well being, even in complicated times.

The erosion into your time might be a company asking you to work more hours overall, to not respect that you have working hours and non-working hours—in the morning, evening, or weekends—since you're now always "at work."

Or a boss may decide that in a two-worker household, they can lean on another partner. Kimberly Holst, who works for her state government, recalled, "I once said I needed to go pick up and stay home with a sick kid. My boss wanted to know why my husband couldn't deal with it since he was home. I had to remind him that while he was at home—he was also at work."

Juggle Parenting

Having kids at home adds special challenges, and that's especially if you don't have childcare or activities lined up.

Your author got word while finishing the draft of this book that his two children's public school system was shutting down for 14 calendar days, which was then extended the following day to at least six weeks.

We'd prepared as well as we could, but managing the kids and working from home is a challenge during school breaks and summer; this was just another version of the same. If you're in a household with two or more working people, it will be even more intense.

Tip: Talk with your kids about this in advance, if you think they have the maturity to hear. We started talking weeks before closure. Our older child was bummed out, as he loves school and plays in three musical ensembles. Our younger, in middle school, was delighted because—middle school! However, we set expectations and it helped them mentally prepare.

Note: This chapter was drafted by Tonya Engst, the previously mentioned co-founder of TidBITS Publishing, and a long-time friend.

Set Boundaries for Kids

All the advice earlier, in Set Boundaries and Preserve Professionalism, applies doubly, if not exponentially, when you have kids at home. This is even more the case in a two-parent home if you work part-time, spend more of your time parenting, or earn less than your partner—the other parent's working time may be considered more "valuable."

If your kids are school age and it's during the time that school is normally in session, you and they may be facing the added stress of an indefinite time before they return to the classroom.

Your kids will need more and clearer visual reminders that you're at work than—one hopes—other adults would require. Signage will help, either in front of you on a table or on a closed door.

> **Tip:** With younger kids, you might ask them to draw a "working: do not disturb" sign for you, giving them a stake. An older kid might be willing to use a word processor or design app to create a fancier version.

Expect interruptions, especially from younger kids or children who may need your time and comfort during the best of times and who may be scared or out of sorts right now. But if you're working at home, you will have to figure out how to manage the interruptions without harming your ability to make a living, likely a critical part of keeping your family safe and healthy.

You will lose productivity in the process, and you should try to accept that upfront. Employers will be living in a dream world if they think that work will proceed as if you are in an office, and some may place demands on you or criticize you when the needs of your children who are also forced to be at home take temporary precedence.

Remember this: you are in the right, not your boss. While your employer has objectives and is likely also mildly freaking out about keeping a work group, office, division, or business going, this is a unique time in modern society and we will all be making adjustments.

However, depending on the age and personality of your kids, you may also have to lay down the law quite firmly about what constitutes an appropriate interruption.

Bring Kids in to Work

Every day may be Take Your Child to Work Day for a while, and it may help to conceive of whatever period that involves in the same way.

This advice doesn't work for every job. A nuclear engineer or corporate graphic designer may not have a place for their kid to step in to contribute to what you're doing. But you can help them feel as if they have a stake.

For workers with any creative component to their job, you may be able to set a younger kid, from 5 to 15, with a parallel activity that's similar to what you're doing. If you're creating a logo in Adobe Illustrator, they could be working with crayons, pens, colored pencils, or a drawing program on a similar task.

Older kids may have enough of their own activities, but they may also be able to help research a task, storyboard ideas, or otherwise contribute in a small way but just enough that they feel seen and useful during an uncertain time—and might actually offset some of lost productivity from being at home.

Put Your Kids to "Work"

While this book isn't about educating your kids at home suddenly, but working at home suddenly, I will pass on the plan my wife and I came up with, faced with our 12 and 15 year olds being home for at least six weeks—probably longer. We set the expectation of four hours of "work," an hour of exercise, and an hour of being outside (but not around people) every weekday.

The kids can count all sorts of productive things as "work," which can include independent studying of academic subjects, practicing instruments, creative expression (drawing, composing, etc.), and "work" work—assisting with adult tasks around the house that involve learning about trades (like electrical or carpentry) or developing a business.

Likewise, you might be able to use your child as a sounding board of sorts. If you're preparing a presentation for work, writing an article or blog post, prepping for a meeting, or just trying to sort out how something sounds, even young children often are good with logic and narrative.

Trying to explain something complicated to someone not quite at your level of sophistication may resemble a bit too exactly talking to your boss. And some kids are brighter than their parents, as I can testify with my two at home.

A Writing Experience Led to a Boost in Confidence

Tonya recounts that her son Tristan wrote an article at age 8 for the publication she and her husband, Adam, co-founded. (Read Tonya's side of it in Take Your Child to Work Day, Macworld Expo Style and Tristan's article, How to Google Earth.)

They found this a fun family activity, which bolstered his confidence with writing, and allowed him to be a part of the family business. He had also read and commented on several Take Control manuscripts when the Engsts ran this book-publishing firm.

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About the Author

Glenn Fleishman never stops writing about technology and its implications. He's in his third decade of writing for publications as varied as *American History*, *Fast Company*, the *Economist*, *Wired*, *Smithsonian* magazine, Ars Technica, Atlas Obscura, the *New York Times*, *Macworld*, and TidBITS, among many others. In 2012, he won on Jeopardy—twice!

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About the Publisher

alt concepts inc., publisher of Take Control Books, is operated by Joe Kissell and Morgen Jahnke, who acquired the ebook series from TidBITS Publishing Inc.'s owners, Adam and Tonya Engst, in May 2017. Joe brings his decades of experience as author of more than 60 books on tech topics (including many popular Take Control titles) to his role as Publisher. Morgen's professional background is in development work for nonprofit organizations, and she employs those skills as Director of Marketing and Publicity. Joe and Morgen live in San Diego with their two children and their cat.

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