Extracted from:

Pomodoro Technique Illustrated
Can You Focus–Really Focus–for 25 Minutes?

POMODORO TECHNIQUE
ILLUSTRATED

THE EASY WAY TO DO
MORE IN LESS TIME

ARRING

Records

Activity Inventory

ToDo Today
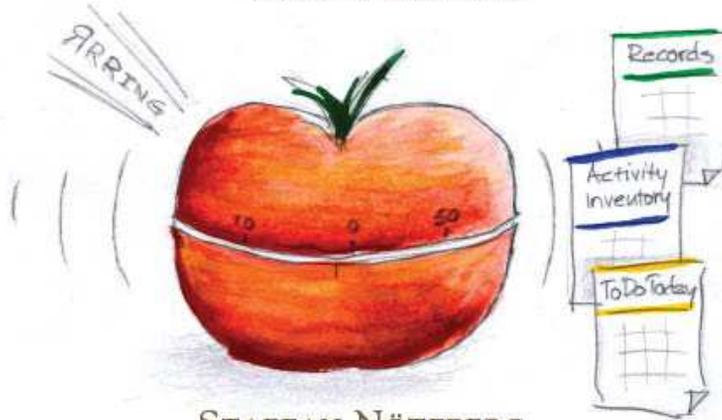
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(creator of the Pomodoro Technique)
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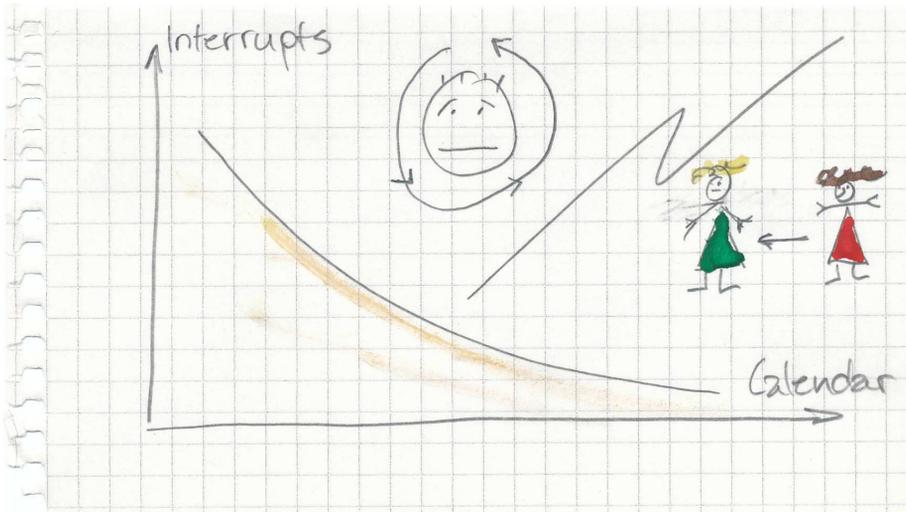
Interruption Strategy

Even though a Pomodoro lasts for only 25 minutes, distractions will still occur. They interrupt us when we're focused and force us to use expensive context switching. Still, the Pomodoro Technique is not a method that suits only lone wolves who can't be team players. Rather, it develops your personal skills in a collaborative environment.

If you have a strategy for handling interruptions, it can cut down on the number of them. Sometimes this strategy will help you carry on with your initial activity, and sometimes it won't.

Interruptions during a Pomodoro come in two flavors.

- First, internal interruptions come from the inside. To elaborate, your instincts send signals to your mind. They tell you to do other things than the activity that you're focused on.

- Second, external interruptions are initiated by someone else. Someone requests something and is waiting for your response. The Pomodoro Technique has strategies for both these types of interruptions that are covered in the following sections.

Internal Interruptions

Even though 25 minutes is a small amount of time, it's almost impossible for the Pomodoro Technique practitioner to not think of other important tasks to do, especially in the beginning. But, things that can seem extremely necessary at the moment might not be so significant when everything is summarized.

Here's a typical Pomodoro for me: I wind up the clock and start to focus on one activity. Then I feel hungry. Then I realize I need to make an important call. And I also was just thinking that I want to check my favorite Internet community. And I must read my email and also reply immediately. And that's not to mention the most recurring of all my instincts—refilling my coffee cup whenever it is empty.

All these are instincts that come from inside. I start them, and they are clear symptoms of procrastination. Perhaps I think that my current activity is too complex or redundant. Perhaps I fear upcoming blame for not getting enough quality in my result. Or perhaps I don't want to start before I know exactly how this whole activity will end. Anyway, the interruptions impede me from completing my Pomodoro and writing an X. The next section covers how to get these interruptions under control.
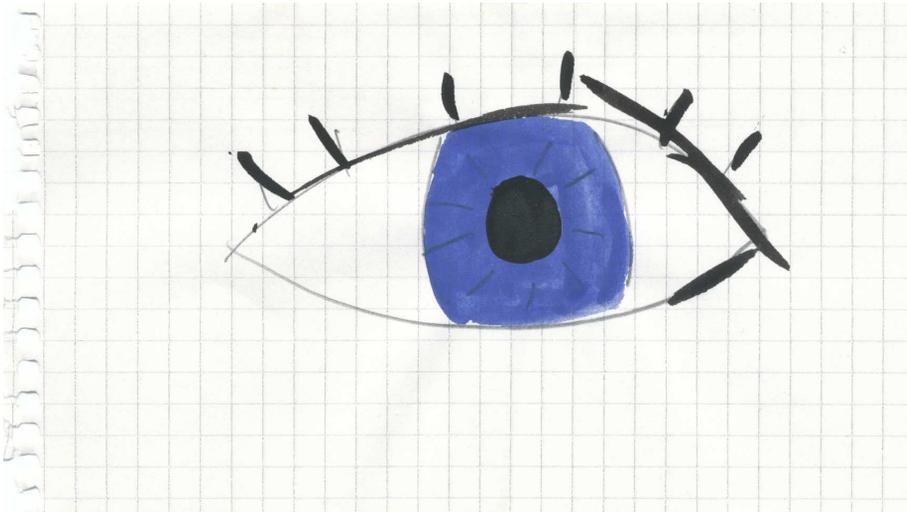
Accept, Record, and Continue

Say during a Pomodoro that I suddenly realize that I need to call the box office. I promised my wife I would reserve tickets for Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*. Do I grab the phone and call immediately? No! I follow my process—the Pomodoro Technique. If I want to cut down on interruptions, I first need to have the facts—the real facts. How many interruptions do I get during a day, and what type are they? My interruptions must be visible.

Instead of calling the box office, I write "call box office" on the bottom of my To Do Today sheet. Actually, I have a header in the middle of this sheet, just below my planned commitment, which says Unplanned & Urgent. Calling the box office was totally unplanned, and it seems pretty urgent.

Then I put a small apostrophe in the right margin of the line where my current activity is written on the To Do Today sheet. Writing the apostrophe is essentially tracking. It represents one internal interruption. At the end of the day I can count the number of apostrophes and reflect. This number is a cold hard fact of how many interruptions I had, not just a hectic feeling of forgetting something. Finally, I intensify my determination to finish the current Pomodoro.

So, to reiterate, the strategy when you get an internal interruption is to first accept it, then record it, and then immediately continue with what you were doing before you got interrupted. As for coffee, I allow myself to drink as much coffee as I'd like during a Pomodoro, but I only make or get more coffee during a break between Pomodori.
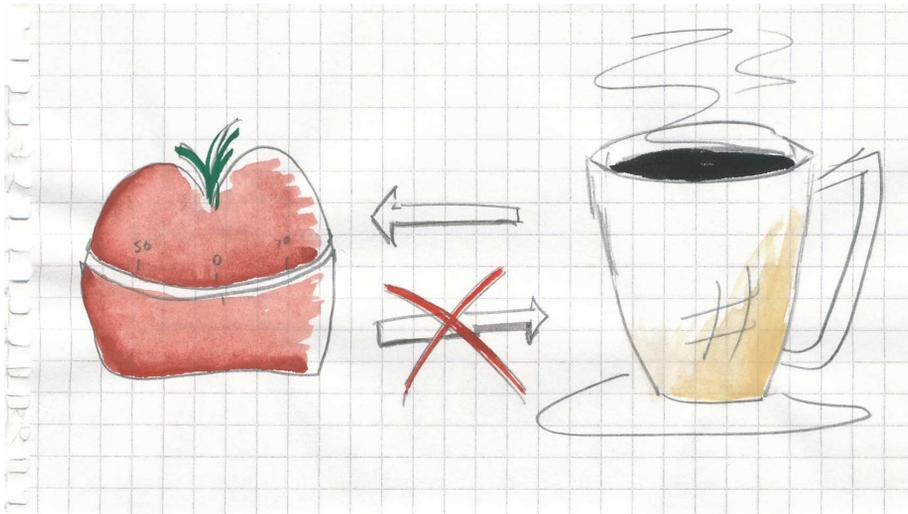
Inverting Dependency

The best strategy for dealing with internal interruptions is to observe, accept, and plan or remove. As mentioned, never switch activities in the middle of a Pomodoro. The rule says, "Once a Pomodoro begins, it has to ring." For instance, following my instincts can appear urgent, but with a little distance I realize that the box office will still be ready to answer my call if I choose to do it during my next Pomodoro, instead of interrupting my current one.

Without this strategy, the result of my activities depends on me not responding urgently to any instincts. Now, when I think of something I need to do, I write it down and can then drop it from my mind. I can later schedule it for the next Pomodoro or another day. In other words, the call to the box office can now be put into my schedule and dropped from my mind. What I suddenly and instinctively wanted to do now depends on my schedule. I have "inverted" the dependency.

By the way, if I know from the beginning that I won't call the box office today, I can write it directly on my Activity Inventory sheet and also add a small u (unplanned) and a deadline.
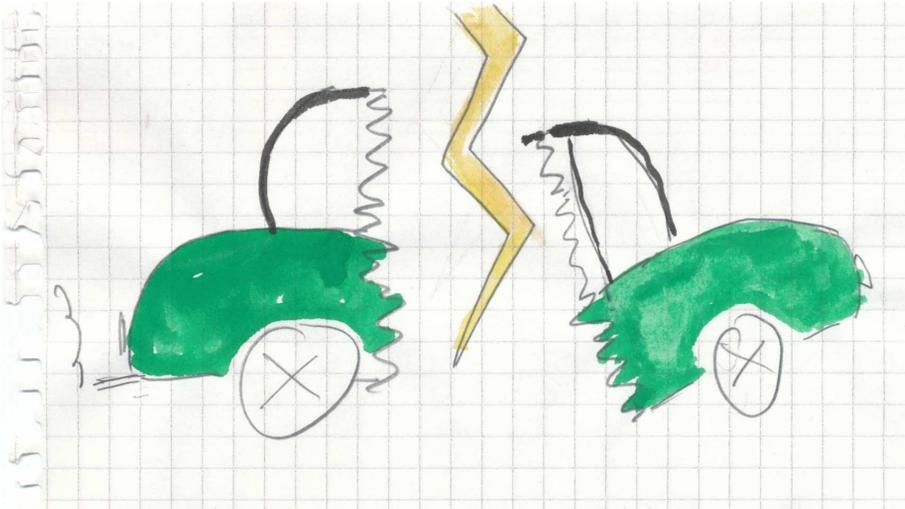
It's Atomic

Some internal interruptions can't be fought. If you really have to visit the restroom, then you have to do that. If you glance at the clock before leaving and see that there is 10 minutes left of your Pomodoro, can you then complete the final minutes when you're back from the bathroom? No way.

A Pomodoro is atomic. It's indivisible. It's the smallest monetary unit in this process. If you leave the activity—temporarily or not—then you have to void this Pomodoro. It will not count, and accordingly you're not allowed to write the X. Instead, you wind up the clock 25 minutes and start a new Pomodoro, conceivably preceded by a small break if you think you need that.

Why can't you build a Pomodoro from the sum of small time slots? Because then you will lose the whole idea of rhythm, and it will be too easy to fall for the temptation of interruption. Is it a failure to void a Pomodoro? No, it isn't. The number of completed Pomodori is not an all-purpose measure of competence. It's a measure of the 25-minute atoms of effort you have completed, and it's a fact that can be used to improve your process for tomorrow's work.
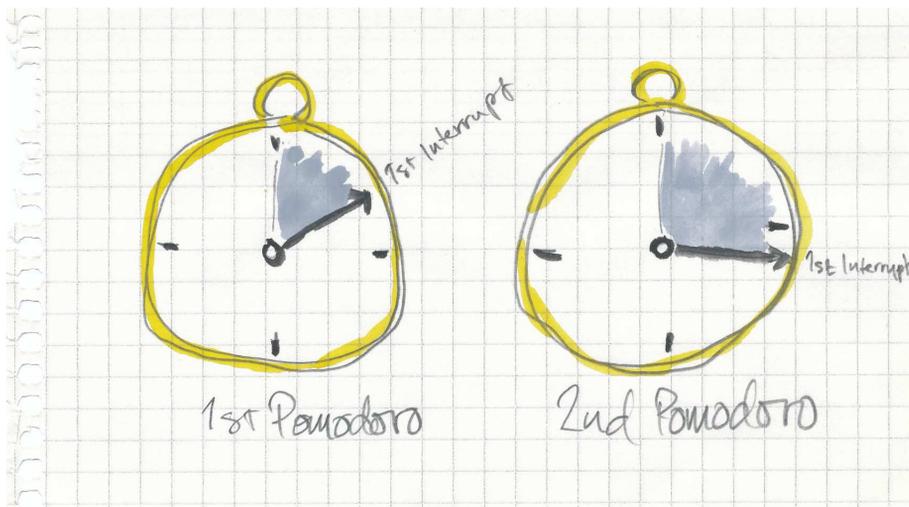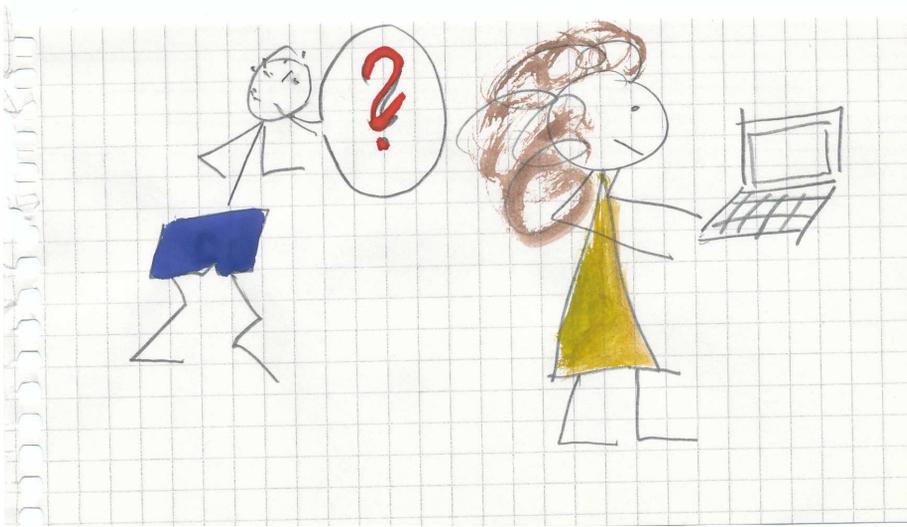
Constant Internal Interruptions

New practitioners of the Pomodoro Technique are surprised of how few Pomodoro they actually complete in one day. Starting to cheat and ignoring that you had internal interruptions is not a solution. The tracking is there for you to improve yourself and your process. It's not to be shown to your boss during your annual salary negotiation.

First, shrink the Pomodoro. Try 15, 10, or even 5 minutes. When you find that you are writing a respectable amount of Xs every day, you can start to expand to 20 and finally 25 minutes at a time. Remember, though, that Pomodori of different length are not compatible. Your tracking will be useless if one X means 5 minutes and another one means 25 minutes. You should go for the smaller Pomodoro for at least two weeks.

You can also track how long it takes until your first internal interruption in every Pomodoro. Try to stay focused just a little bit longer than the last Pomodoro. This tracking can also give you an idea of how long your Pomodori should be in order to avoid being interrupted.

External Interruptions

In addition to internal interruptions, there are also external interruptions in our lives. These are things like when a colleague drops in and asks you a work-related question. Or when someone drops by to ask you a more social question like, "What did you think about last night's episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*?" Or perhaps an old friend calls and wants to talk about old times. Or maybe your project leader needs some estimates from you for her upstream report. Or, the most common one—your email client constantly beeps.

All these interruptions tend to happen while you're trying to focus on an activity in the middle of a Pomodoro! But, if you live in the river, you should make friends with the crocodile. Without understanding the finer nuances, external interruptions will just be irritating.

External interruptions have an interactive nature. Someone is waiting for your response. They are trying to prevent you from writing your X. So, you need a strategy to cut down on interruptions. Still, I can't stress enough that the Pomodoro Technique is not about refusing to help your team buddies. It's not a method for the last man left on the moon.

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