

PH 393: Being Human with Technology

Practicing Digital Declutter

Spring 2026, 3 credit hours

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Office Hours by Appointment Only

Tentative Syllabus - Subject to change



Course Description

This course explores the relationship between technology and our humanity by challenging standard digital practices of many students today. We take a look behind the curtain at drivers of these technologies and their ultimate ends, and why these ends might be destructive of our humanity. And in keeping with the ancient vision of philosophy, we will attempt to align our practice with the theory and practice a “digital declutter.”

Course Objectives

- To explore current attitudes and practices surrounding technology
- To interrogate common attitudes regarding technology
- To understand the theory behind the overconsumption of technology
- To practice a “digital declutter”

Course Resources (All Provided)

Books

- Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction*
- Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*
- Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism*
- Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

Other Provided Readings

- Wendell Berry, “Why I am not going to Buy a Computer”
- Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?,” *The Atlantic*
- Maximos Conostas, “Attend to Thyself: Attentiveness and Digital Culture”
- Andy Crouch, Introduction and Chapter 1 in *Tech Wise Family*
- Jonathan Haidt, “Pay Attention: Essential Advice for the Class of 2026,” *The Atlantic*
- Jonathan Haidt, “Get Phones Out of Schools Now,” *The Atlantic*
- Mary Harrington, “Behind Closed Doors”
- Jared Cooney Horvath, “We Gave Students Laptops and Took Away Their Brains,” *The Free Press*
- Rose Horowitch, “The End of Reading is Here,” *The Atlantic*
- Alan Jacobs, “Habits of Mind in an Age of Distraction,” *Comment*
- Derek King, “Reading as Moral Formation,” *Hedgehog Review*
- James Marriott, “The Dawn of the Post-Literate Society,” Substack
- Iris Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection” and “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts” in *Sovereignty of Good*
- Jenny Odell, “The Impossibility of Retreat” in *How to Do Nothing*
- Christine Rosen, “You Had to Be There,” “How We Wait,” and “Mediated Pleasures” in *The Extinction of Experience: Being a Human in a Disembodied World*
- Simone Weil, “On the Right Use of School Studies”

Multimedia

- Documentary, *Godspeed: The Pace of Being Known*
- Documentary, *The Social Dilemma*
- Podcast Series, *How to Touch Grass*

Classroom Policies

No Screens | No screens are permitted in the classroom for this course. Exceptions will be considered.

Be respectful | At some point in the semester, you'll likely disagree with a classmate (or me) during this course. Hopefully, you will! That's okay. Welcome to academic discourse. Do it respectfully. Don't be distracting. Don't interrupt. Don't yell. Don't be insulting. Failure to follow these guidelines might result in you being asked to leave the classroom and being marked absent for the day. If the behavior continues after an initial warning, further action will be taken at my discretion.

No plagiarism | Online work must be submitted through Canvas; no email submissions will be accepted. Ignorance is not an acceptable defense for plagiarism. Submitting work written by AI, such as ChatGPT, counts as plagiarism. The University takes plagiarism very seriously.

Video and audio recordings are not permitted during the class unless the student has received prior permission.

Other important notes:

- I usually check emails Monday - Friday from 8 AM–4 PM. Expect responses only within those times. Even within those times, I may not respond immediately. Expect a reply within 48 hours.
- **Use Chicago Manual Style for papers.** Papers should conform to academic standards. It usually helps to read the paper aloud, too.

Grading

Grading scale: 900-1,000 points =A; 800-89 =B; 700-799=C; 600-699=D, 599 or below=E.

Attendance: You are allowed **up to four unexcused absences without penalty**. For each additional absence beyond four, 30 points deducted from final grade. **100 points.**

Participation: Participation refers to consistent participation in class discussions: asking or answering questions, talking in small groups, etc. And: Introverts who are terrified to speak in front of a class can receive participation points in other ways, including emailing or meeting with the professor, or speaking in small groups. **200 points.**

Hobby Experiment: For the practice of decluttering, we need new habits to rehabilitate our attention. This assignment aims to introduce the student to a new habit—a new hobby—to replace excessive amounts of time on screens. Starting in the final week of the digital declutter assignment, you will explore a new, entirely analog hobby outside of class. You will spend at least one hour per week across four weeks practicing the hobby (from Week 11 to Week 14). Work with the instructor to identify an appropriate hobby for this experiment. Good examples include: sketching, painting, biking, running, crocheting, puzzles, crossword puzzles, sports, or other forms of art. After four weeks, you will submit a written reflection in 800-1,000 words on your experience, with liberal reference to the course materials when appropriate. **200 points.**

Digital Declutter Journal: Each student is given a physical, paper journal (you may use your own, if you desire). You will reflect on your habits—digital or otherwise—every day from Wednesday February 10th through Sunday March 28th (you can take off spring break). The journal begins one week before the digital declutter begins and concludes one week after the digital declutter month ends. During the first week of the journal (the week leading up to the declutter), you will identify three tech habits that you want to change and actionable steps for changing them during the declutter. You

will attempt to put them into practice for the entire digital declutter. Daily reflections should be about a paragraph or so (sometimes smaller, sometimes larger). **200 points.**

Digital Rule of Life. In your Digital Declutter journal, after the declutter assignment, you will add a “Digital Rule of Life” (this may be handwritten or it may be typed, printed, and taped into the journal). In the Christian tradition, a “Rule of Life” refers to a person’s intentional, structured intentions and goals for life, centered particularly around the things in life most important to them. It involves identifying Daily, Weekly, Monthly, and Yearly rhythms that one commits to live by hereafter—think of it as “New Years Resolutions” on steroids.

For this assignment, you will (1) write a comprehensive reflection on the digital declutter and your daily journal experience (~500 words); (2) write a personal reflection on the course readings and resources, specifically identifying three that encourage you to make changes in your life and why (~500-700 words); and (3) outline the goals and habits you want to integrate into your life hereafter, with specific action steps for how to accomplish them (no word expectations, but be thorough). **300 points.**

Tentative Schedule

Note: Read all readings prior to class that day.

Reading as Digital Declutter: This class will not shy away from long or several (or both) readings every week because it plays an important role in our digital declutter. A recurring theme in the class is replacing screen time with new habits: reading is one of those habits. **It is expected that you complete all of the readings, and I will accept no excuses if your screentime is more than one hour per day.**

Unit 1 | Humans in the Digital Age

Week 1 (1/12 & 1/14) | Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Ch. 1-2; Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”; Horvath, “We Gave Students Laptops and Took Away Their Brains”; Haidt, “Get Phones Out of Schools Now”

Week 2 (1/19 & 1/21) | Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Ch. 6-7, 11; Odell, “The Impossibility of Retreat” in *How to Do Nothing*; Andy Crouch *Tech Wise Family* Chapters 1-2

Week 3 (1/26 & 1/28) | Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, Introduction & Arguments 1-3; Harrington, “Behind Closed Doors”
View in Class: Documentary, *The Social Dilemma*

Week 4 (2/2 & 2/4) | Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, Arguments 4-7; Marriott, “The Dawn of the Post-Literate Society”; Rosen, “You Had to Be There,” in *The Extinction of Experience*

Unit 2 | The Digital Declutter

Week 5 (2/9 & 2/11) | Wendell Berry, “Why I am Not Going to Buy a Computer”; Newport, Introduction & Chapters 1-2

Assignment: Digital Declutter Begins 2/10

Week 6 (2/16 & 2/18) | Newport, Chapters 3 & 4; Rosen, “How We Wait,” in *The Extinction of Experience*

View in Class: Documentary, *Godspeed: The Pace of Being Known*

Week 7 (2/23 & 2/25) | Newport, Chapters 5 & 6

Week 8 (3/2 & 3/4) | Newport, Chapter 7 & Conclusion; Rosen, “Mediated Pleasures,” in *The Extinction of Experience*

Week 9 (3/9) | Warren, “Stay in Your Cell” in *What Grows in Weary Lands*; Jonathan Haidt, “Pay Attention: Essential Advice for the Class of 2026”

No Class on 3/11

Week 10 (3/16 & 3/18) | No Class (Spring Break)

Week 11 (3/23 & 3/25) | Warren, “Pledge Your Body to the Walls” and “Let the Silt Settle” in *What Grows in Weary Lands*

Assignment: Hobby Experiment Assignment begins 3/21; Digital declutter Ends 3/28

Unit 3 | New Habits of Attention

Week 12 (3/30 & 4/1) | Reading Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head*, Chapters 1-2; Horowitch, “The End of Reading is Here”; King, “Reading as Moral Formation”

Assignment: Digital declutter journal due in class on 3/30

Week 13 (4/6 & 4/8) | Relationships Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head*, Chapters 7-9; Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” pgs 16-44

Week 14 (4/13 & 4/15) | Thinking Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head*, Chapters 10-11, Epilogue; Jacobs, “Habits of Mind in an Age of Distraction”; Simone Weil, “On the Right Use of School Studies”

Assignment: Hobby Experiment Assignment concludes 4/12;

Week 15 (4/20 & 4/22) | Creativity Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head*, Chapter 13; Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts,” pgs 82-91

Week 16 (4/27) | *Final Reflections* No assigned reading

Assignment: Digital Rule of Life due 4/27