ABSTRACT

When searching your desk for a pen, how do you constrain your attention to the desk and avoid being distracted by your office partner’s bright shoes? The attention literature posits that people constrain attention to relevant locations with an “attentional window.” This window filters in visual information within its spatial window and filters out information outside of its window. For example, if your attentional window is configured to your desk, your visual system will process the objects on the desk, but not objects on the floor. One unanswered question about the attentional window is whether it can configure to objects or, instead, acts as a spotlight on different vague locations (i.e. zoom-lens). To answer this, observers completed a simple search task with a salient distractor and were cued to search for the target at either locations or objects. When locations were cued, salient distractors at both cued and uncued locations captured attention, indicating imprecise configuration of the attentional window. When objects were cued, only salient distractors on the cued object captured attention, indicating the attentional window configures to specific objects; not vague locations. This research demonstrates that when searching your desk for a pen, you are able to specifically search items on your desk and not just search the vague location of your desk.