

Multitasking - the myth



By [Tiffany Markman](#)

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Tackling multiple tasks at once means faster results. Also, it's a great way to impress a boss. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'll bet 'good multitasker' appears on every CV you've ever sent. But the newest thinking is, however, that multitasking is actually a weakness, not a strength. (video)

Introducing 'task-switching'

Modern research gives some surprising insights, beginning with the fact that the phrase 'multitasking' is a misnomer. Defined by Merriam Webster as "performing more than one task simultaneously", multitasking is *actually* time-sharing or task-switching: switching back and forth between tasks. Like when you work, check email, work, tweet, work, eat.

Rather than increasing productivity, task-switching can result in confused, frustrated, burned out people and organisations, with impaired cognitive abilities and more stress.

The evidence

Don't believe me? Well, check this out: Called "[Gauging Your Distraction](#)", it's an interactive game, designed by The New York Times in consultation with experts from the Universities of Utah and Michigan, that illustrates the inconsistency between our expectation of multitasking and the reality. Summary: SMS while driving and you'll crash.

Your brain is not designed to do more than one thing at a time. Instead, it toggles from task to task. When you drive while talking on the phone, for example, your brain can use its resources to drive or talk, but not both. Scans show that when you talk on the phone, there's limited activation of your visual brain - so you're driving without really watching. This is how you end up in places without knowing how you got there. (Or dead.)

Here's some more proof: the famous Selective Attention/Gorilla video. Give it a bash.

The facts

If you're not one for watching videos (I'm not - too many distractions), here are the facts:

- Multitasking is less efficient, because you need to switch gears for each new task, and then switch back again. And the brain needs 15-25 minutes before it can adjust its focus to, or back to, another task.
- Multitasking is a more complicated process, making you more prone to stress and errors. The world's crazy enough, don't you think?
- Some tasks can't be perfected when done simultaneously, like those that require deep critical thinking. The more analysis a task needs, the more attention it needs.
- Multitasking can harm brain function in the long term, contributing to early mental decline and decreased sharpness. Chronic multitaskers also have increased cortisol levels, which can damage memory.

Single-tasking - the goal

Single-tasking is about doing one thing until it is completed, after which you move on to another task. Sound like a waste of time? Maybe. But the truth is, when you single-task, you are more productive, more efficient and - *gasp!* - quicker at the task in question.

How to single-task

1. **Plan your day in blocks**, with smaller open blocks for urgent stuff that comes up. You might try one-hour blocks, or half-hour blocks, depending on what works for you. Or try 40-minute blocks, with 20 minutes between for miscellaneous tasks. There are useful apps to help with this, like [FocusBooster](#).
2. Then, **prioritise your daily activities**. (You may have such confidence in your ability to be productive that you schedule more than you can actually do. Add in the daily crises plus the multitasking and you're unlikely to complete everything on your list.) Rank upcoming tasks based on how important they are, when they need to be accomplished and how much time they'll take. Then choose those that rank highest and commit to finishing them regardless of distractions that may arise.
3. **Work on your single Most Important Task (MIT) first thing**. This is hard, because almost all of us check email to get into work mode. Don't do anything else until your MIT is done. Take a break (to check email) and start on your next MIT. If you can do two or three of these in a morning, the rest of the day is a breeze.
4. When you're working on an MIT in a time block, **reject all other distractions**. Close (not minimise - *close!*) your email inbox. Put your phone on silent (not vibrate - *silent!*). Focus on the one task, and get it done without worrying about other stuff.
5. **Be conscious**. When you start doing something, become aware that you're starting it. As you do it, become aware of really doing it and of the urge to switch to something else. Really commit yourself to that task, whatever it is. Achieve '[flow](#)'.

6. If things come in while you're working, **take note of them** in whatever capture system you're comfortable using - a diary, a notepad, an app. Then get back to the MIT. Every now and then, use a break to process your notes and email, adding new tasks to your to-do list and re-designing your schedule if necessary.
7. Sometimes **an interruption is so urgent** that you can't put it off until you're done with the MIT. In that case, make a note of where you are with the task, and put all the documents or notes for that task together and aside. Then, when you come back to that task, you don't have to spend as much time making the task-switch.
8. Finally, remind yourself that **an emergency** for someone else isn't always an emergency for you. Be clear in defining a crisis. Postpone those that don't make it.

Good luck!

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

I spend 10 hours a day writing - and teaching others to write. I was South Africa's Freelance Copywriter of the Year in 2020 and one of the world's 'Top 50 Female Content Marketers' in 2021.

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