

The Myth of Multitasking

Most students think they multitask well. They write essays with music in their ears, scroll through messages while studying, and attend lectures while planning their next class. It feels efficient, almost superhuman, to be able to do several things at once. But neuroscience says otherwise. What people call multitasking is usually rapid task-switching, and every switch costs attention, energy, and accuracy. The brain is not wired to process multiple streams of information at full depth; it simply toggles quickly, losing clarity each time.

Researchers at Stanford University found that people who habitually multitask are worse than their single-tasking peers at filtering out irrelevant information, recalling information, and maintaining attention. This happens through the way attention works. The reason lies in how attention operates. When a student shifts between writing a paper and checking a notification, the prefrontal cortex resets. That reset takes seconds, sometimes minutes, to fully refocus. Multiply that by dozens of interruptions in a study session, and the 'time saved' disappears.

Yet multitasking persists because it feels stimulating. Each task switch brings a small burst of dopamine, the same reward chemical that encourages social media use. The rush feels like productivity even when the output suffers. A student may believe they have spent two hours writing, but half of that time may have gone into cognitive reorientation: remembering what they were doing, rebuilding the mental thread, and resisting distraction. The result is exhaustion disguised as effort.

The costs go beyond productivity. Cognitive overload increases cortisol, the body's stress hormone. Over time, this leads to irritability, burnout, and difficulty sleeping. Ironically, the students who multitask to manage heavy workloads often end up feeling busier, more anxious, and less capable of completing tasks efficiently.

Single-tasking, on the other hand, restores mental rhythm. When the brain stays with one activity long enough to enter what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called 'flow,' focus becomes self-sustaining. Information integrates more deeply, creativity improves, and satisfaction replaces fatigue. Some colleges now incorporate 'deep work' hours, for example, structured quiet periods with phones off and browsers closed, to teach this discipline.

The idea is not to abandon multitasking completely. Modern life requires flexibility: answering an urgent text while cooking, or switching between readings and notes. The goal is awareness and knowing when switching adds value and when it drains it. True productivity means finishing one thought before chasing the next.

In an age that glorifies speed, focus feels like rebellion. Yet it is the only way to think clearly enough to create something that lasts. The myth of multitasking sells momentum; focus builds mastery.