

How to Multitask

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Co-authored by Manuela Pauer, CPCC, PCC , Eric McClure , and 23 contributors

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Does it seem like doing only one thing at a time isn't enough anymore? While multitasking can save time, it isn't appropriate for every situation. To be effective, multitasking has to be done with care and attention.

Steps



- 1 Establish your goals.** ^[1] The old saying, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there" is just as true even if you are following multiple tasks.



- 2 Evaluate whether multitasking is appropriate for the goals and tasks you must do.** In your honest assessment, is multitasking necessary? Is it going to help you get more done? Or is it only going to result in your doing multiple things slowly or badly?^[2]
- If your manager or someone else is asking you to multitask and you feel it is counter-productive or unsafe, try explaining your concerns.



- 3 Set aside time to give intense or complex tasks your full focus.** ^[3] Let it be known that you prefer to have time to yourself for an hour or two each day, and use that time for intense tasks that require your full concentration.^[4]



4 Choose tasks which are routine, familiar, or fluent to multitask. Do not expect to have the full focus required to learn a new activity or perform a difficult or complex task.



5 Plan ahead. You can't schedule every interruption, or predict how many times the phone will ring in an afternoon, but you may be able to select your tasks and have in mind a general sequence of events to complete them but avoid needless repetition or redundancy.^[5]

- Start longer or more involved tasks first. Fill in the gaps with shorter, well-defined, or self-contained tasks.
- Think about whether there are resources to manage and distribute, other than your time and attention. If you are baking multiple dishes, each one will need time in the oven. Can you put them all in together, or must they go in some sequence?



6 Work ahead. If you know there will be a big rush in the afternoon, start early to set up and prepare. If you've ever seen restaurant staff wrapping flatware in napkins at 3pm, you've seen a good example of working ahead in action.



7 Allow extra time. If you anticipate frequent interruptions, factor that in when you plan for how long you expect everything else to take.



8 Work on one thing at a time, but alternate. Jugglers may have many objects in the air, but they usually manipulate only one at a time.^[6]

- In terms of tasks, alternating rapidly may mean figuring out ways to switch between tasks cleanly. Perhaps that means identifying or even building in times when a task does not need your direct attention (such as when laundry is in the washing machine or a casserole is in the oven). That may also mean setting a timer or alarm, or making a mental or written note to remind yourself to pay attention to a task again when the time comes.



9 Eliminate unnecessary tasks. ^[7] If you're multitasking to be more efficient, don't spend time doing extra things.^[8] The exception is a background activity to help pass the time if a primary task is dull, mechanical, or routine. For instance, if listening to the radio or an audio book helps with the tedium of painting a wall, go for it.



10 Simplify tasks you can't eliminate. Especially if they're routine tasks, try to perform them only in as much detail as they require. This doesn't mean you should turn out sub-standard work. Instead, look for inefficiencies and improve what you can.^[9]



11 Choose compatible tasks. For instance, you may find that reading and listening to speech both use the same type of focus. Instead, try pairing a physical task, such as ironing clothes, with a mental task, such as listening to the radio.



12 Choose tasks which are easy to interrupt. Especially if the multitasking consists of dealing with frequent interruptions (such as a ringing telephone), choose tasks that can be easily paused to do concurrently.

- When you do pause, pause consciously and do what you need to, to remind yourself to resume.
- When possible, pause at natural pause points. This may be the end of a page, or the beginning of a waiting cycle.



13 Keep a selection of smaller projects or simpler tasks around to fill gaps in a larger project. That is, do the larger project as a priority, but do basic, filler tasks any time you find yourself waiting for information or inspiration on a larger project.



14 Use wait time efficiently. Have something with you to do, especially in places you anticipate waiting (the airport, post office, or dentist's office). Reading is an easy, portable task. Carrying note cards or a [notebook](#) to jot ideas is also a good idea.



15 Work at a pace you can sustain. Take breaks when you need them, especially to balance rushes.^[10] Multitasking may require intense focus, and may not be an activity you can sustain indefinitely.



Expert Q&A

Question

Is it bad to multitask?



Manuela Pauer, CPCC, PCC

Certified Career, Leadership, & Happiness Coach
Expert Answer

Not always, but it can be. Sometimes, work can get so busy that it seems the only way to get things done is by multitasking, but it may end up making you less productive in the end.

Helpful 0 Not Helpful 0

Question

What are 3 ways to increase productivity?



Manuela Pauer, CPCC, PCC

Certified Career, Leadership, & Happiness Coach
Expert Answer

First, limit when you check your email and social media. Then, commit to doing one thing at a time, since multitasking is not always a great idea. Last, but not least, take regular breaks, as our brains need rest in order to be productive.

Helpful 0 Not Helpful 0

Question

Is it easy to multitask?



Moonmodule1998

Top Answerer

It depends on the tasks, the multitasker, and the multitasker's environment and situation. It's easier for some people than it is for others and may take practice, but it's much easier if you plan your multitasking in advance.

Helpful 21 Not Helpful 2

Question

How do I improve my attention to detail skills?



Jeana Bettis

Community Answer

Multitasking tends to make you less focused on a specific task, so if you want to pay attention to details, I suggest not doing too many other things at the same time.

Helpful 16 Not Helpful 2



Tips

- Notice what works and what doesn't. If homework in front of the TV takes twice as long as doing homework and watching a show separately would, don't pair those tasks in the future.
- Try not to overwhelm yourself. If you feel as though you cannot complete two tasks at once, break both down into manageable pieces and begin on just one part.
- Make your exercise and walking time your 'you' time.^[11] Do this on lunch hour to save even more time. Or, ride a bicycle, run, or walk to work to multitask your commute with your workout and avoid sitting in traffic.
- Take along something else to do in a meeting, especially if you expect it to include

topics that don't involve you. If the topic of a meeting doesn't involve you, arrange to attend only the relevant parts, or ask a colleague to summon you when you're needed, and don't attend at all.

- If you have a lot of tasks on your computer, try closing all the tabs that aren't related to the specific task, or put them in a separate window, or it might be a bit overwhelming.^[12]



Warnings

- Always give your full concentration to tasks that might have safety consequences. Never multitask while driving.
- Don't overdo it. Don't do so many things at once that none gets done.^[13] Also, don't take on so much that you burn out.
- Remember that multitasking lowers the quality of the work that you do and the amount that you will remember afterwards.^[14] Only multitask as a last resort.^[15]

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About This Article



Co-authored by:

Manuela Pauer, CPCC, PCC

Certified Career, Leadership, & Happiness
Coach

This article was co-authored by **Manuela Pauer, CPCC, PCC** and by wikiHow staff writer, **Eric McClure**. Manuela Pauer is an International Coach Federation accredited Career, Leadership, and Happiness Coach and Facilitator. With more than 14 years of experience, Manuela specializes in helping mid-career professionals connect with their purpose, passions, and strengths to create a career and life they love. Before deciding to help other professionals, she had a successful corporate career spanning strategy consulting at Bain & Company, Product Management at a Silicon Valley start-up, and Executive Director of Product Management and Strategic Planning at AOL. Manuela holds a BS in Business Administration from The University of California, Berkeley, and received her Certified Professional Co-Active Coach training from The Coaches Training Institute. This article has been viewed 288,549 times.



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