

TEACHER'S GUIDE · BUSINESS ENGLISH

# Can we really multitask?

LEVEL
**B2 · Upper-Intermediate**

TIME
**60 min**

SKILLS
**Reading · Speaking · Grammar · Vocabulary**

### Learning objectives

In this lesson, you can:

- understand a research summary about multitasking
- use linking words of contrast and consequence
- explain the hidden costs of switching tasks
- suggest strategies to work with more focus

### Key vocabulary

switch · switching costs · productivity · complex · familiar · efficiency · add up · executive control · distraction · focus

### Materials

- this worksheet
- article: *Multitasking: Switching costs* (American Psychological Association)

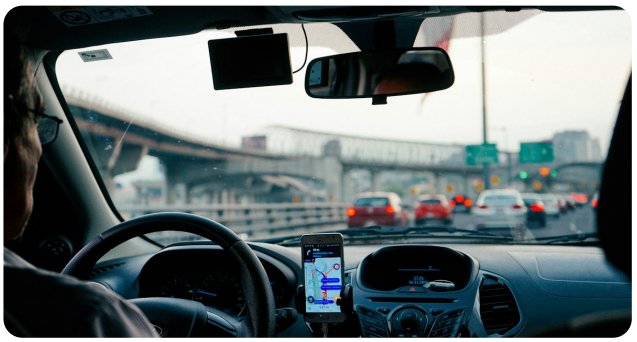
## 1 Warm up

SPEAKING

**Look at the pictures. What can you see? How are they connected to the topic? Then answer the questions with your teacher.**



PICTURE A · many screens and tasks



PICTURE B · a driver with a phone

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1. Do you do several things at the same time at work? Give examples.
2. Are you more productive when you multitask? How do you know?
3. What distracts you most during the day?

## 2 Vocabulary preparation

VOCABULARY

**Part A: Match the words with the definitions.**

add up (phr v) | familiar (adj) | switch (v) | efficiency (n) | complex (adj) | switching cost (n)

1. _____ to change from one thing to another
2. _____ the extra time you lose when you change from one task to another
3. _____ with many parts; difficult to understand or do
4. _____ known to you because you have done it before
5. _____ doing things well without wasting time or energy
6. _____ to increase gradually until it becomes a large amount

**Part B: Collocations with *task* and *focus*. Complete the sentences with the words in the box.**

switch | complete | focus | prioritise | interrupt | lose

1. It's hard to _____ on one thing in an open-plan office.
2. I usually _____ my tasks: the most important ones first.
3. Every time I check email, I _____ tasks.
4. Please don't _____ me while I'm writing the report.
5. I need two hours to _____ this task.
6. When the phone rings, I _____ my concentration.

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## 3 Main input: read and learn

READING · GRAMMAR

The American Psychological Association (APA) summarises research about what happens in the brain when we switch between tasks. Read the first two paragraphs, the paragraph about the 2001 experiments, the section "What the research means" and the first paragraph of "How we use the research".

ARTICLE

**Multitasking: Switching costs**
American Psychological Association · research summary (2006) · selected paragraphs, about 470 words (3 minutes) · free
https://www.apa.org/topics/research/multitasking

**Read the first two paragraphs. Answer: Does multitasking improve or reduce productivity? How do psychologists measure the cost of switching tasks?**

### Language focus: linking words: contrast and consequence

Research texts connect ideas with linking words. Look at the examples.

| Meaning | Linking words | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Contrast | although / even though (+ clause)<br>however (new sentence)<br>whereas (compare two facts) | Although each switch costs only a few tenths of a second, the costs add up.<br>Multitasking seems efficient. However, it takes more time. |
| Consequence | so / therefore / as a result | Switching costs are bigger for complex tasks. Therefore, avoid multitasking on difficult work. |

**Punctuation:** *However* and *Therefore* usually start a new sentence and are followed by a comma. *Although* joins two clauses in the same sentence.

**Practice: Complete the sentences with *therefore, whereas, as a result, although* or *however*.**

1. _____ multitasking feels productive, it often takes more time.
2. Each switch costs only a fraction of a second. _____ , the costs add up during a day.
3. Simple tasks have small switching costs, _____ complex tasks have larger ones.
4. I check email every five minutes. _____ , I make more mistakes in my reports.
5. Switching tasks can be dangerous while driving. _____ , many places limit phone use at the wheel.

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## 4 Reading comprehension

READING

**Part A: Read again. Are the sentences true (T) or false (F)? Circle.**

1. Multitasking with complex tasks reduces productivity. T / F
2. Psychologists measure switching costs by comparing performance with and without switching. T / F
3. Switching costs are larger for simple, familiar tasks. T / F
4. Each switch may cost only a few tenths of a second. T / F
5. Meyer says task switching can cost as much as 40 percent of productive time. T / F
6. The article recommends multitasking on complex tasks to save time. T / F

**Part B: Choose the correct answer.**

1. What are the two stages of "executive control"?
   (a) Goal shifting and rule activation. (b) Planning and doing.
   (c) Listening and speaking.
2. In the 2001 experiments, participants switched between...
   (a) driving and using a phone. (b) math problems and classifying geometric objects.
   (c) reading and writing emails.
3. Why is task switching dangerous for a driver using a phone?
   (a) The phone battery runs out. (b) Drivers speak more slowly.
   (c) The car keeps moving during a half-second lapse.
4. According to the article, small switching costs...
   (a) disappear with practice. (b) add up when people switch repeatedly.
   (c) only affect young people.



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**Part C: Think and answer.**

1. Which activities in your job are “complex” and should never be combined with other tasks?

2. Some people say they are good at multitasking. How would you respond, using the research?

3. Suggest two strategies a company could use to reduce task switching.

## 5 Speaking practice and discussion

SPEAKING

**Part A: Choose TWO cue cards. Talk about each card with your teacher for 1–2 minutes.**

**Cue card 1: My working day**

- Interruptions
- Focus time
- Best hours

**Cue card 2: Technology and attention**

- Notifications
- Chat apps
- Email

**Cue card 3: Open-plan offices**

- Advantages
- Disadvantages
- Solutions

**Cue card 4: Safety**

- Driving
- Machines
- Phones

**Cue card 5: Managing priorities**

- To-do lists
- Delegation
- Saying no



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**Part B: Answer the questions with your teacher. Give reasons and examples.**

1. How often do you switch between tasks in a normal working day? What causes it?
2. Which tools or habits help you to focus on one task?
3. Is it realistic to avoid multitasking in a modern office? Why? / Why not?
4. How should managers balance quick responses with deep, focused work?
5. Should phones be banned in meetings or while driving? Explain your view.

## 6 Lesson takeaway and wrap-up

REVIEW

**Complete the sentences. Then tell your teacher.**

1. Three useful linking words from today: _____
2. The most important finding in the text: _____
3. Although I _____ , I _____
4. Starting tomorrow, I will _____

**Takeaway:** Every switch between tasks has a small cost, and those costs add up — especially with complex work. Protect focused time for difficult tasks and avoid combining them with other activities.

## + Optional extension / homework

WRITING

**Write a short article (150–180 words) for your company newsletter: "Why we should stop multitasking". Use evidence from the APA text and at least four linking words.**



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**Alternative activity:**

Track your task switches for one morning and present the results and two improvements to your teacher in the next class.

## References

American Psychological Association. (2006, March 20). *Multitasking: Switching costs*. https://www.apa.org/topics/research/multitasking

**Original materials:** vocabulary, language examples and exercises were written for NATeacher for B2 learners.

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# Teacher's guide

**Learning objectives.** By the end of the lesson, the student can: understand the main findings of a research summary; explain switching costs; use linking words of contrast and consequence correctly; suggest strategies for focused work.
**Total time:** approx. 60 minutes — Warm up 6 · Vocabulary 7 · Main input 10 · Comprehension 14 · Speaking 18 · Wrap-up 5. The extension is optional homework.

## ▶. Main input: about the resource

**Resource:** *Multitasking: Switching costs*, American Psychological Association (published 20 March 2006). Free; no login. https://www.apa.org/topics/research/multitasking

**What to read:** paragraphs 1–2, the paragraph about the 2001 experiments (Rubinstein, Meyer and Evans), the section "What the research means" and the first paragraph of "How we use the research" (about 470 words, 3 minutes). The research is from 2001–2006 but the findings are still widely cited; present it as classic research.

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**Key information:** Doing more than one task at a time, especially complex tasks, reduces productivity. Psychologists measure switching costs in task-switching experiments by comparing performance with and without switching. In 2001 experiments, Rubinstein, Meyer and Evans had young adults switch between tasks such as math problems and classifying geometric objects: every switch cost time, and costs were larger for complex and unfamiliar tasks. Executive control has two stages: goal shifting and rule activation. Although switch costs may be small (a few tenths of a second), they add up when people switch repeatedly; multitasking may seem efficient but can take more time and cause more errors. Meyer: brief mental blocks can cost as much as 40% of productive time. Application: avoid multitasking, especially with complex tasks; a driver on a phone who loses half a second at 30 mph can hit an obstacle.

## 1. Warm up

6 mins.

Show the pictures. Ask the questions and ask for concrete examples from the student's workday.

**Possible answers:** "The pictures show people doing several things at once — at work and while driving."
**Support:** give phrases: *I tend to..., What distracts me is...* **Challenge:** ask "Is multitasking a skill or a myth?"



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## 2. Vocabulary preparation

7 mins.

The student completes Part A and Part B alone. Check together, say the words aloud and ask the student to repeat the difficult ones.

### Part A

1. switch
2. switching cost
3. complex
4. familiar
5. efficiency
6. add up

### Part B

1. focus 2. prioritise 3. switch 4. interrupt 5. complete 6. lose

**British and American English:** the article is American: *math* (British *maths*), *cell phone* (British *mobile phone*), speeds in *mph*. British spelling *prioritise*, American *prioritize*.

## 3. Main input and language focus

10 mins.

Open the article on screen. The student reads the first two paragraphs for the gist questions, then the other selected parts. **Answers:** It reduces productivity, especially with complex tasks; they compare how long people take with and without switching tasks (task-switching experiments).

Present the language focus in 1–2 minutes: elicit the rule from the examples, then move to the practice.

### Practice

1. Although
2. However
3. whereas
4. As a result
5. Therefore

**Common mistakes:** "Although it is fast, but it is expensive" → remove *but*; "However multitasking is..." (no comma) → "However, multitasking is..."; confusing *whereas* (contrast) with *while* (time/contrast).



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## 4. Reading comprehension

14 mins.

The student reads again and works alone. Check together and ask the student to find the evidence in the text.

### Part A

1. T 2. T 3. F (larger for complex, unfamiliar tasks) 4. T 5. T 6. F (it recommends avoiding it)

### Part B

1. a 2. b 3. c 4. b

### Part C

1. Open answer, e.g. “Writing contracts or analysing data.” 2. e.g. “Although it feels efficient, research shows that switching costs add up, so it usually takes more time and causes more errors.” 3. e.g. “Meeting-free mornings; turning off email notifications during focus time.”

**Accept:** paraphrases with the correct meaning; any well-argued answer in Part C. **Support:** mark the selected paragraphs on screen before reading. **Challenge:** the student explains “goal shifting” and “rule activation” with an example from their job.

## 5. Speaking practice and discussion

18 mins (cue cards 6 · questions 12).

The student chooses two cards and speaks for 1–2 minutes on each. Then ask the five questions one by one. Let the student finish, then ask follow-up questions: “Why?”, “Can you give an example?”, “What would happen if…?”

**Model answer (Q3):** “Although it’s difficult to avoid interruptions completely, we can reduce them. For example, my team blocks two hours every morning for focused work, and as a result we finish reports faster.”
**Evaluate:** linking words used accurately; evidence from the text; concrete strategies; range and fluency.
**Correction:** note mistakes while the student speaks and correct 2–3 of them at the end, so you don’t interrupt fluency.



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## 6. Lesson takeaway and wrap-up

5 mins.

The student completes the sentences and says them aloud. Ask: "What will you change in your workday tomorrow?"

**Possible answers:** "although, however, therefore"; "Switching costs are bigger for complex tasks."; "Although I like answering emails quickly, I will check them only three times a day."

## +. Optional extension / homework

Check: 150–180 words; clear argument with evidence from the text; correct use and punctuation of linking words; persuasive but professional tone.

## ✓. Did the student reach the objectives?

- Can the student explain what switching costs are and why they matter?
- Does the student use *although, however, whereas, therefore* correctly, with correct punctuation?
- Can the student use evidence from the text to support an opinion?
- Can the student suggest practical strategies for focused work?

## ✔. Resource verification log

| Resource | Institution / URL | Type · length | Checks (21 Oct 2026) | Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Multitasking: Switching costs | American Psychological Association (professional and scientific organisation) https://www.apa.org/topics/research/multitasking | Research summary · selected paragraphs, about 470 words (3 min) | Page loads; content matches the exercises; free, no login; suitable for B2; scientific organisation, not a language school | **Approved** |

Photos: credits listed in the references (Unsplash). No image links are included in the worksheet.

### References

American Psychological Association. (2006, March 20). *Multitasking: Switching costs*. https://www.apa.org/topics/research/multitasking

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