

Conquering the Multitasking Brain Drain

By [Judy Willis MD](#)

October 25, 2016

With the increasing surge of information and the compelling distractions of social media, videos, and games at their fingertips, students are understandably drawn to engage with these distractions during homework. Most kids believe they can have it all -- by multitasking. The fallacy is that when combining these activities with homework, they are getting less done, not more. That's because the brain doesn't multitask.

Teachers, parents, and students all suffer from brain-draining inefficiency when the focus on homework is disrupted by multitasking. Consequences such as inadequate sleep, languishing on the next day's learning, or late and low-quality assignments push parents and teachers into unpleasant roles as nags, helicopters, and rule-enforcers.

What is happening in the brain that makes multitasking so counterproductive? The brain is designed to limit conscious focus to one thing at a time. Our ancestors needed single focus to remain alive in their unpredictable world. The survival-in-the-wild brain that we humans inherited from them remains designed for unifocal tasking.

What feels like doing two things at once is actually the brain shifting its processing from one neural network to another. Each shift comes with a cost of consuming time, mental effort, and brain fuel. Microseconds are wasted as the brain turns off one active network and turns on the next. The result: less done and less remembered.

**Neuro-Logical Self-Awareness Activity**

Self-inventory to determine how multitasking while doing homework affects time and efficiency.

1. Make a list of all the multitasking things (potential distractions) you like to do during homework. (Examples: internet or TV, listening to music, Snapchat, Instagram, responding to texts/calls/emails as they arrive, web surfing, frequent snack or game breaks, daydreaming, others?.)
2. Select a subject where homework assignments usually take about the same amount of time each night. If possible, choose a class whose homework is often useful for understanding the next lesson. (Examples: math homework or history assignments where chapters read are discussed the next day.)
3. For the subject you choose, write your multitasking items on the following chart to collect data from your own observations.

Multitasking things:

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
-

