NEWS LESSON

Why We Put Off the Things We Want to Finish



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Which task becomes harder the longer you put it off?
2. Would you rather start something badly or wait for the right mood?
3. What makes a small task feel surprisingly big?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**procrastination**	☐	A	causing harm to your own plans or aims
2	**discipline**	☐	B	lasting only a short time
3	**short-lived**	☐	C	the ability to make yourself do what you should do
4	**self-defeating**	☐	D	exciting and attractive, not ordinary
5	**avoidance**	☐	E	the act of staying away from something unpleasant
6	**observational**	☐	F	based on watching what happens, without controlling it
7	**judgement**	☐	G	the habit of delaying things that you ought to do
8	**glamorous**	☐	H	an opinion about how good or bad something is

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

You know the deadline is tomorrow, yet you make tea and rearrange folders. Studies from 2026 link delay with perfectionism, anxiety and attention, without proving what causes it.

1 You have a presentation to finish, a deadline approaching and a perfectly usable desk. Yet instead of opening the document, you find yourself rearranging folders, checking messages and making a cup of tea you didn't particularly want. You know that delaying the work will make tomorrow more unpleasant. Somehow, that knowledge changes nothing. Procrastination has a peculiar power: it effectively allows us to watch ourselves make a poor decision while feeling momentarily relieved by it.

2 The standard explanation is that procrastinators lack discipline. Psychological research suggests something considerably more interesting. An important task can stir up fear of failure, boredom, uncertainty or the pressure to meet unrealistic expectations. Avoiding it provides a short-lived escape from those feelings. The decision may be self-defeating in the long run, but in the moment it delivers an immediate emotional reward. Seen this way, procrastination is not necessarily an absence of concern; sometimes it is concern becoming so uncomfortable that we struggle to act.

3 Several studies published in 2026 examined these patterns among university students. Researchers reported associations between procrastination and perfectionism, anxiety, poor attentional control and problematic social media use. An Italian study used questionnaires and tasks measuring attention and mental control. People reporting more procrastination tended to perform less well on some of those tasks. The association does not establish why they put things off, and many of the studies were observational. The studies cannot prove that scrolling causes delay, or that every person who puts things off has the same underlying problem.

4 Perfectionism illustrates the paradox beautifully. Someone determined to produce a flawless essay may postpone writing the first sentence because nothing sounds sufficiently impressive. Research becomes an elaborate form of avoidance: another article, another note, another chance to prepare without exposing an imperfect draft to judgement. Meanwhile, a less demanding writer gets something onto the page and starts improving it. The supposedly higher standard has backfired, leaving the perfectionist with less time and a more stressful deadline.

5 What helps is often less glamorous than waiting for inspiration. Breaking a task down into specific, almost embarrassingly small actions can reduce the resistance attached to starting. Rather than resolving to complete a fifty-page report, decide to write one heading and three sentences. Put away obvious distractions, use a short timer and allow the first attempt to be untidy. Such strategies do not remove every psychological obstacle, particularly where anxiety or attention difficulties are significant, but they make the next step clearer and less intimidating.

6 The real cost of procrastination extends beyond unfinished work. It can create a cycle of guilt, rushed decisions and the conviction that we are somehow incapable. Yet harsh self-criticism may simply add another unpleasant feeling to the task we already want to escape. It is more useful to ask what precisely we are avoiding: confusion, possible criticism, boredom or a standard nobody could reasonably meet. Once that obstacle is identified, progress becomes easier to design. The goal is not to turn every minute into productivity, but to stop letting temporary discomfort run the show.

Sources: Nature Humanities and Social Sciences Communications. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer suggests that procrastination can sometimes reflect too much concern rather than too little. (T) (F) (NG)
2. The Italian study found that people who procrastinate more did worse on every task measuring attention. (T) (F) (NG)
3. The writer believes a short timer works better than breaking a task into small actions. (T) (F) (NG)
4. The writer accepts that the suggested strategies may not fully overcome anxiety or attention difficulties. (T) (F) (NG)
5. The writer's aim is to help people turn every minute into productivity. (T) (F) (NG)

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

conviction **elaborate** **momentarily** **obstacle** **paradox** **postpone** **precisely** **underlying**

1. It is a _____ that the people who care most about a task are often the last to start it.
2. The committee had to _____ the vote until more evidence became available.
3. Treating the symptoms will not help unless we address the _____ cause.
4. She spoke with such _____ that even the sceptics were persuaded.
5. She hesitated _____ before signing the contract.
6. They devised an _____ scheme involving fake names and three bank accounts.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The _____ between stress and poor sleep is well documented. **(ASSOCIATE)**
2. Her extreme _____ to criticism meant she never showed anyone her drafts. **(SENSITIVE)**
3. It would be _____ to assume that every delay comes from laziness. **(WISE)**
4. After the change, attendance improved _____ . **(MARK)**
5. Researchers urged readers to interpret the correlations _____ . **(CAUTION)**

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. At this level, many phrasal verbs take a fixed preposition too, as in shy away from. Learn the whole chunk.

brush	fall	iron	rule	shy	stem	wade

1. Many people _____ away from tasks that might expose their weaknesses.
2. Critics tend to _____ aside findings drawn from small samples.
3. When motivation fades, many people _____ back on old habits.
4. She had to _____ through hundreds of pages of notes before she could write.
5. Procrastination can _____ from a fear of being judged.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What would help someone begin a task they were avoiding?
2. Can a deadline be useful without becoming stressful?
3. Which would you change first: the task, the place or your expectations?

9 Role-play: the report nobody wants to start

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the colleague who wants to start now

You and your colleague must finish a report by Friday. You want to start today, even with a small part. Explain why starting early helps and suggest a first step.

Student B · the colleague who wants to wait

You'd rather wait until you feel ready. Explain why. Listen to your colleague's plan and decide if you can agree on a small first step.

Useful phrases

I think we should start today.
I'd rather wait until I feel ready.
Let's just write the first heading.
That's a fair point, but I'm not in the mood.
How about fifteen minutes with our phones away?
OK, you've convinced me.

Afterwards, tell the class what you agreed and whether it was a good plan.

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 G · 2 C · 3 B · 4 A · 5 E · 6 F · 7 H · 8 D

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 paradox · 2 postpone · 3 underlying · 4 conviction · 5 momentarily · 6 elaborate

6 Word forms

1 association · 2 sensitivity · 3 unwise · 4 markedly · 5 cautiously

7 Language focus

1 shy · 2 brush · 3 fall · 4 wade · 5 stem

This lesson is free. If it saved you time, you can support johnplusnews at **ko-fi.com/johnplusenglish**