NEWS LESSON

What Makes a Simple Task So Hard to Start?



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	**anxiety**	☐	A	a bad situation that is difficult to get out of
2	**frustration**	☐	B	the annoyed feeling when you cannot do what you want
3	**perfectionism**	☐	C	a reason you give to explain why you did not do something
4	**self-control**	☐	D	a feeling of worry about something that might happen
5	**trap**	☐	E	a first version of writing that you will change later
6	**draft**	☐	F	the need to make everything exactly right
7	**cycle**	☐	G	a series of events that keep repeating
8	**excuse**	☐	H	the ability to stop yourself doing what you want to do

3 Read

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

Psychologists increasingly look at the feelings behind the delay: anxiety, perfectionism and the fear of doing a poor job.

1 The deadline is tomorrow, but your presentation is still an empty document. You know exactly what you ought to be doing. Instead, you answer a few unnecessary messages, make another cup of tea and suddenly decide your desk needs cleaning. By the time you finally sit down to work, the evening has disappeared. If this sounds familiar, you have experienced procrastination: putting something off despite knowing that the delay may make matters worse.

2 People often describe procrastinators as lazy or badly organised, but psychologists increasingly look at the emotions behind the behaviour. Starting a difficult task can bring up anxiety, frustration or the fear of doing a poor job. Avoiding it offers immediate relief, even if that relief disappears when the deadline approaches. In the moment, the decision can seem perfectly reasonable.

3 Research published in 2026 adds detail to the picture. Studies involving university students found relationships between procrastination and perfectionism, fear of failure, inattention and problematic social media use. One Italian investigation used questionnaires and tasks measuring attention and self-control. Students who reported more procrastination tended to perform less well on some of those tasks. Because much of this research observes people at one moment in time, it cannot establish that phones or perfectionism directly cause procrastination in every individual.

4 Perfectionism creates a particularly frustrating trap. Imagine a student preparing an essay who refuses to write anything until the opening paragraph sounds brilliant. Each possible sentence seems inadequate, so the student keeps reading and researching instead. Hours later, there is still nothing on the page. The attempt to produce excellent work has actually prevented any work from being produced. Meanwhile, someone willing to write a rough first draft may have a useful starting point.

5 Breaking the cycle usually requires making a task feel manageable. You might put your phone in another room, set a timer for ten minutes or divide a large project into clear stages. Instead of promising to complete an entire report, commit to writing three sentences. Small actions lower the emotional barrier to starting, and progress can build up once the first step is taken. It also helps to notice the excuse you are making without treating yourself as a failure.

6 None of this means that procrastination is harmless. Repeatedly putting off important work can damage confidence, increase stress and leave people exhausted by last-minute efforts. But blaming yourself for being lazy may miss the point. A better response is to identify what makes the task uncomfortable and change the conditions around it, accepting that progress is usually slower and less glamorous than the plans we imagined. Starting before you feel ready, accepting an imperfect first attempt and taking one practical step can be more effective than waiting for a sudden burst of motivation.

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. Procrastination is more common in students than in people at work. T F NG
2. The research proves that phones cause procrastination. T F NG
3. According to the text, avoiding a task can bring short relief that disappears later. T F NG
4. A person who writes a rough first draft may be in a better position than a perfectionist. T F NG
5. The writer says blaming yourself is the best way to deal with procrastination. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

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

barrier	commit	establish	glamorous	harmless	inadequate	relief	willing

1. Avoiding the phone call gave her a brief sense of _____ , although the worry returned later.
2. Each possible sentence seems _____ , so the student keeps reading instead.
3. An occasional lazy afternoon is _____ and nobody needs to worry about it.
4. Having no quiet room can be a real _____ to studying at home.
5. A single survey cannot _____ why people behave in this way.
6. Cleaning offices at night is not a _____ job, but someone has to do it.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. By the time he opened the document, his colleagues _____ their share of the work. (FINISH)
2. He _____ the phone call all week. (AVOID)
3. If she had started earlier, she _____ properly last night. (SLEEP)
4. The office _____ every evening by a small team. (CLEAN)
5. She admitted _____ an hour on her phone. (WASTE)

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some phrasal verbs have three parts, such as come up with. The verb changes with the tense, but the small words stay the same.

break	carry	come	get	hold	pull	sort

1. I keep meaning to _____ out my inbox, but there are hundreds of emails.
2. She never seems to _____ round to answering the letter.
3. You can _____ down a big task into stages.
4. The team had to _____ up with a new plan after the first one failed.
5. He promised to _____ on working until the report was ready.

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

4 True, false or not given

1 NG · 2 F · 3 T · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 relief · 2 inadequate · 3 harmless · 4 barrier · 5 establish · 6 glamorous

6 Verb forms

1 had finished · 2 has been avoiding · 3 would have slept · 4 is cleaned · 5 wasting

7 Language focus

1 sort · 2 get · 3 break · 4 come · 5 carry

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