

TT937: Unitasking in the Apple Ecosystem

Joe Kissell

Senior Editor, TidBITS

Web: joekissell.com • **Twitter:** [@joekissell](https://twitter.com/joekissell)

Note: This handout doesn't duplicate what I show and discuss during the presentation, but rather is meant as a reference to help you remember the gist of my talk—and provide more background information on the topic that you can dig into at your leisure.

Definitions

- **Multitasking:** Performing multiple tasks concurrently—or switching among tasks rapidly. *The definition is similar whether you're talking about computers or humans, but whereas computers are expressly designed to multitask, human brains aren't.*
- **Polytasking:** Depending on who you ask, it means either:
 - Multitasking when the tasks are closely related, as in cooking, or
 - Performing multiple tasks concurrently (in which case the term “multitasking” is used only in the task-switching sense)

Used only when speaking of humans.

- **Unitasking:** Focusing one's attention on just one overall task at a time. Also called “single-tasking.” *Used when speaking of humans, although early computers that lacked any sort of multitasking capability might have been said to unitask.*

Key Points

- Multitasking is great—nay, *essential*, for Macs and iOS devices. They would drive us crazy without it!
- On the other hand, humans are *terrible* at multitasking—even (and perhaps especially) those who think they’re great at it.
- When people attempt to multitask anyway, they become less efficient, less productive, and more stressed.
- Ipso facto, unitasking can increase productivity, reduce stress!
- However, some of the ways Macs and iOS devices *appear* to promote unitasking actually do the opposite—they force users to juggle tasks and keep extra information in short-term memory. That’s because...

- **Task ≠ App!**

Tasks rarely correspond exactly to applications. Occasionally, tasks are *smaller* than apps, but most common (human) tasks require more than one app—as well as tools and communication in the real world.

- You can take steps (see ahead) to become a better unitasker, but the first step is understanding what a “task” truly is.
- A good way to think about tasks is not as atomic actions but as higher-level “working spheres”—groups of related actions that move you toward a single, specific goal and minimize cognitive gear-shifting.
- Macs and iOS devices can help you unitask more effectively. In fact, having your Apple devices do *more* multitasking and display *more* things on screen at once can facilitate unitasking on your part.
- Apple and third-party developers could do more to promote (human) unitasking...but even if they don’t, you can choose approaches that make the most of what today’s Macs and iOS devices offer.

Tips for Becoming a (Better) Unitasker

- Figure out what, for you, constitutes each “task,” and what tool(s) you need for that task.
- Try to finish one task before moving on to the next one...or at least force yourself to stick with a task for a couple of hours.
- Set up your Mac and other devices to enable you to focus on one task (as you define it) at a time (see the next list).
- Don’t assume every activity is a task that requires your full attention! Sure, you can read the news while eating breakfast. Why not?
- Don’t live with a distraction just because resolving it isn’t part of your current task! If you’ve got to pee, do so!
- If you’re having a hard time focusing on just one thing, try the Pomodoro Method (see links later in this handout).

Using Your Apple Devices for Unitasking

- Use email rules and smart mailboxes to separate messages associated with different tasks.
- Be circumspect about full-screen mode.
- Keep all task-relevant apps and windows visible at the same time, if possible.
- Consider whether more screen real estate (larger and/or multiple displays—or Mac + iPad, for example) might enable you to unitask more effectively by showing you all the tools you need at once.
- Try Mac software that selectively blocks out distractions, and iOS software that lets you use multiple task-related tools at the same time (links found later in this handout).
- Minimize notifications—especially from Growl.

Joe's Personal Manifesto

Or should I say "Unifesto"?

I will not voluntarily multitask.*

**Planned polytasking is OK—e.g., [making Thanksgiving dinner](#).*

I unitask proudly and unapologetically, because it makes me demonstrably more efficient.

Want to see what I accomplished [last year](#)? Or in [2010](#)? Or [2009](#)?

I decide what constitutes each "task," as honestly and realistically as possible.

Deciding what's a "task" is also a task.

I plan out tasks by day, week, and month as best I can so that everything gets done.

Some of those clowns just can't fit in the Beetle. Tough luck.

If an employer (publisher, client) gives me any grief about unitasking, I politely direct them to mounds of research [see [next page](#)] that makes multitasking look idiotic.

I may also casually mention how many books I've written in the past year.

I put my plentiful Mac screen real estate to good use, and I use Mac and iOS software that facilitates the kinds of tasks I need to do.

Also, I've learned to type with my toes—why should they be idle?

When it's time to work, I work.

Coffee is just as effective for unitaskers as for multitaskers.

When I need to relax, I relax.

I can relax several different ways at the same time.

If circumstances require it, I can break any of my rules and not feel guilty about it, because hey, they're my rules.

Articles & Studies

Multitasking

General Articles

- [Multitasking—The Cognitive Costs of Multitasking](#) by Kendra Cherry at About.com
- [The Myth of Multitasking](#) by Christine Rosen in *The New Atlantis* (Spring 2008)
- [You Say Multitasking Like It's a Good Thing](#) by Charles J. Abaté (NEA)
- [Human multitasking](#) (Wikipedia)
- [Computer multitasking](#) (Wikipedia)

Academic and Medical Studies

- Charron, S. and Koechlin, E. Divided Representation of Concurrent Goals in the Human Frontal Lobes. *Science* 16 April 2010: Vol. 328 no. 5976 pp. 360–363. [Abstract & full text](#)

Mentioned in:

- ▶ [Multitasking Splits the Brain](#) (Science Magazine)
- ▶ [Motivated Multitasking: How the Brain Keeps Tabs on Two Tasks at Once](#) (Scientific American)
- ▶ [Why you can't do 3 things at once](#) (MSNBC)
- Clapp, W.C., Rubens, M.T., Sabarwal, J., and Gazzaley, A. Deficit in Switching Between Functional Brain Networks Underlies the Impact of Multitasking on Working Memory in Older Adults. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* (2011). [Full text \(PDF\)](#)

Mentioned in:

- ▶ [Multitasking Takes Toll on Memory, Study Finds](#) (New York Times)
- ▶ [Multitasking Study Reveals Switching Glitch in Aging Brain](#) (ScienceDaily)

- Hamilton, R., Vohs, K., Sellier, A., and Meyvis, T. Being of Two Minds: Switching Mindsets Exhausts Self-Regulatory Resources. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2010). Abstract: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1147689> • [Full text \(PDF\)](#)

Mentioned in [Why Multitasking Is Nothing To Brag About](#) (FYI Living)

- González, V.M. and Mark, G. “Constant, Constant, Multi-tasking Craziess”: Managing Multiple Working Spheres. CHI2004, April 24–29, Vienna, Austria. [Full text \(PDF\)](#)
- Just, M.A., Carpenter, P.A., Keller, T.A., Emery, L., Zajac, H., and Thulborn, K. R. (2001). Interdependence of Non-overlapping Cortical Systems in Dual Cognitive Tasks. *NeuroImage*, 14, 417-426. [Abstract](#) (full text available for purchase, \$31.50)

Mentioned in [Multitasking drains brain](#) (New York Times)

- Ophir, E., Nass, C., and Wagner, A.D. Cognitive Control in Media Multitaskers. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* (2009). [Full text \(PDF\)](#)

Mentioned in:

- ▶ [Multitaskers Are Bad at Multitasking, Study Shows](#) (Discover Magazine)
- ▶ [Media multitaskers pay mental price, Stanford study shows](#) (Stanford Report)
- ▶ [More Bad News About Multi-tasking](#) (Exploring the Mind!)
- Rubinstein, J.S., Meyer, D.E., and Evans, J.E. (2001). Executive Control of Cognitive Processes in Task Switching. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 27(4), 763-797. [Abstract](#) (full text available for purchase, \$11.95)

Mentioned in:

- ▶ [You Say Multitasking Like It's a Good Thing](#) (NEA)
- ▶ [Multitasking undermines our efficiency, study suggests](#) (American Psychological Association)
- ▶ [Study: Multitasking is counterproductive](#) (CNN)

Cell Phone Use/Texting While Driving

- [Texting While Driving: How Dangerous is it?](#) (Car and Driver)
- [Talking on a cellphone while driving](#) (Mythbusters Episode 33)
- Strayer, D.L., Drews, F.A., and Crouch, D.J., [A Comparison of the Cell Phone Driver and the Drunk Driver](#) [PDF] (University of Utah, Salt Lake City)
- Watson, J.M. and Strayer, D.L. [Supertaskers: Profiles in extraordinary multitasking ability](#) [PDF]. (According to this study, 1 in 40 people may have the exceptional ability to talk while driving without a decrease in driving performance.)

Mentioned in [“Supertaskers” Can Safely Use Mobile Phones While Driving](#) (Slashdot)

Polytasking

- [Polytasking](#) definition (Urban dictionary)
- [Polychronicity](#) (Wikipedia)

Unitasking (or Single-Tasking)

- [A Case for Singletasking: The One-Task-at-a-Time Method](#) by Jason Fitzpatrick at Lifehacker
- [Singletasking Is the New Multitasking?](#) by Azadeh Ensha at Lifehacker
- [Multitasking Is Out, Single Tasking Is In](#) by Dr. Jim Taylor at The Huffington Post

The Pomodoro Technique

[The Pomodoro Technique](#): Arrange your work into 25-minute segments separated by 5-minute breaks. Good for forcing yourself to unitask without having to worry about losing track of other projects.

Mac and iOS Software for Unitasking

Mac Software

Dimming/Hiding Utilities

Note: I don't particularly recommend these two, as they implicitly equate app with task!

- [Isolator](#) (free)
- [Menu Eclipse](#) [iTunes link] (\$2.99)

“Distraction-free” Writing Apps

Note: Again, these apps tend to assume writers want to see just the text they're working on—which isn't necessarily the case.

- [JDarkRoom](#) (free) Distraction-free text editing.
- [Scrivener](#) (\$45) Full-featured writing environment with a variety of full-screen options.
- [StoryMill](#) (\$49.95) Full-featured writing environment with distraction-free full-screen mode.
- [Writer](#) (free) Writing app that dims all other apps.
- [WriteRoom](#) (\$9.99) Distraction-free writing.

“Working Sphere” Utilities

Utilities that let you group multiple apps and settings into “tasks”

- [Concentrate](#) (\$29) Lets you set up task-specific action sets that can include opening and quitting the apps you select, opening documents or websites, blocking websites, setting chat and Skype status, running scripts and more—all for whatever period of time you choose.
- [Vitamin-R](#) (\$19.95) Can hide or quit specified apps for user-definable “time slices,” track and log objectives, and more.

“Pomodoro” Timers

- [My Little Pomodoro](#) [Mac App Store link] (\$3.99)
- [Pomodoro](#) [Mac App Store link] (\$4.99)
- [PomoTodo](#) [Mac App Store link] (\$1.99)

Internet Blocking Utilities

- [Anti-Social](#) (\$15) Disables access to Facebook, Twitter, and other sites you specify for any number of minutes, up to 8 hours.
- [Freedom](#) (\$10) Disables *all* Internet access for any number of minutes, up to 8 hours.
- [SelfControl](#) (free) Lets you selectively block Internet access to specific domains for a given period of time.

iTunes Store/Mac App Store Problem Solvers

- [NoMoreiTunes](#) (free) Safari extension that prevents iTunes from opening when you click links to apps in the iTunes store (such as the ones in this very handout). Instead, you’ll see the descriptions in Safari, which lets you open many tabs or windows at the same time!
- [Appcuity](#) (Lite version: free; Pro version: \$7.99 for 1 year, \$13.99 for 2 years, or \$21.99 for lifetime subscription) Stand-alone search tool for the Mac App Store. In addition to being able to search, sort, and query the database every which way, you can easily switch between descriptions of apps, or even open each one in its own window.

iOS Software

“Distraction-free” Writing apps

(merely a small sampling)

- [iA Writer](#) [iTunes link] (\$1.99)
- [My Writing Spot for iPad](#) [iTunes link] (\$4.99)
- [Simplenote](#) [iTunes link] (free)
- [Writings](#) [iTunes link] (\$4.99)
- [Clean Writer](#) [iTunes link] (\$0.99)

“Multitasking” Apps

- [IM+ Pro](#) [iTunes link] (\$0.99) This instant messaging client also has a built-in browser, so you can chat and surf at the same time.
- [Multitasking for iPad](#) [iTunes link] (\$0.99) This app puts a Web browser, Twitter client, and Facebook client on screen simultaneously.
- [Side by Side](#) [iTunes link] (free) Multiple customizable panes (browser, note taking, file viewing, etc.)
- [Split Pea](#) [iTunes link] (\$3.99) Lets you take notes while browsing the Web by putting a browser in one pane and a text editor in another.

“Pomodoro” Timers

- [Pomodoro Time Management](#) [iTunes link] (\$1.99) iPhone/iPod touch only
- [Pomodoro Timer](#) [iTunes link] (\$0.99) iPhone/iPod touch only
- [Promodoro](#) [iTunes link] (\$0.99) iPhone/iPod touch only
- [Pomodoro App for iPad](#) [iTunes link] (\$5.99) iPad only