

The Science of Procrastination

Why We Delay and How to Stop

Understanding the battle between your present self and your future self

■ B1 Reading ■ 30 min ■ Everyday Life

Level	B1 (Intermediate)
Skill	Reading
Topic	Everyday Life
Duration	30 minutes
Age Group	Teens & Adults

Learning Objectives

- ◆ Read and understand a text about the psychology of procrastination
- ◆ Learn 15 key vocabulary items related to psychology and productivity
- ◆ Identify the emotional causes and real costs of procrastination
- ◆ Discuss personal habits and strategies for staying productive
- ◆ Write about a personal experience with procrastination

1 Before You Read — Honest Habits

Think about your own habits and discuss honestly:

1. What is the last important task you put off? Why did you delay it?
2. Do you usually start assignments early or wait until the last minute?
3. What do you typically do instead of the task you should be doing?

2 Reading: The Procrastination Puzzle

The Procrastination Puzzle: Why We Do It and How to Stop

You have an important deadline tomorrow. You know you should start working now. But instead, you check your phone. You make a cup of tea. You reorganise your desk. You watch "just one more" video. Before you know it, hours have passed, the deadline is dangerously close, and the stress is building. If this sounds familiar, congratulations — you are a **procrastinator**, and you are in very good company. Studies suggest that around 20 percent of adults are chronic procrastinators, and among university students, the figure is closer to 70 percent.

But procrastination is not simply laziness, and understanding the difference is crucial. Lazy people do not care about getting things done. Procrastinators *do* care — often deeply — but they struggle to start or finish tasks despite knowing the **consequences**. Procrastination is an **emotional** problem, not a time management problem, and treating it requires understanding what is really happening inside your brain.

Your Brain on Procrastination

When you face a task that feels boring, difficult, or stressful, a part of your brain called the **amygdala** — the emotional alarm system — perceives it as a threat. Your brain's immediate response is to avoid the threat and seek **comfort** instead. Scrolling through social media, eating snacks, or tidying your room all provide small bursts of **dopamine** — the brain's pleasure chemical — which temporarily make you feel better.

This creates a **cycle**: you feel anxious about a task, you avoid it to feel better, the avoidance provides short-term relief, but the task does not go away — it gets closer and more stressful. Psychologists call this the "procrastination loop," and breaking it requires interrupting the pattern at its source.

The Present Self vs. The Future Self

One of the most powerful explanations for procrastination comes from **behavioural** economics. Researchers describe a constant battle between two versions of you: your "present self" and your "future self." Your present self wants pleasure, comfort, and instant **gratification**. Your future self wants to be healthy, successful, and prepared. The problem is that your present self is the one making decisions right now — and it consistently **underestimates** how much work the future self will have to do.

This is why we make ambitious plans on Sunday night ("I will study every day this week!") but abandon them by Tuesday morning. The person who made the plan was the future-oriented self. The person who has to actually do the work is the present self — and the present self would rather watch videos.

The Real Cost of Delay

Procrastination is not harmless. Research links chronic procrastination to lower grades, reduced career success, and higher levels of stress, anxiety, and **regret**. Procrastinators are also more likely to experience health problems because they delay medical appointments, exercise, and healthy eating — always promising to start "tomorrow."

There is also a significant impact on **self-esteem**. Each time you procrastinate and then rush to finish something at the last minute, you reinforce a negative belief about yourself: "I am not disciplined enough." Over time, this creates a **vicious cycle** where low confidence leads to more avoidance, which leads to more failure, which leads to even lower confidence.

How to Beat Procrastination

The most effective **strategy** against procrastination is surprisingly simple: make the task smaller. Instead of telling yourself "I need to write an entire essay," say "I will write just one paragraph." This technique — called the "two-minute rule" — works because it reduces the emotional threat that triggers avoidance. Once you start, you often find that continuing is much easier than starting was.

Other evidence-based strategies include removing **distractions** (put your phone in another room), creating specific deadlines for each stage of a project, working alongside other people (the "body doubling" technique), and rewarding yourself after completing small milestones. It also helps to practise self-compassion — research shows that people who forgive themselves for procrastinating are less likely to do it again, while those who criticise themselves harshly tend to procrastinate even more.

Procrastination is a deeply human struggle — but it is not a life sentence. With the right understanding and a few small changes, you can start winning the battle between your present self and your future self. And the best time to start? Right now — not tomorrow.

3 Key Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
procrastinator	a person who regularly delays tasks or decisions	Around 20% of adults are chronic procrastinators.
consequences	the results or effects of an action or decision	Procrastinators care about outcomes but struggle despite the consequences.
emotional	relating to feelings rather than logic or reason	Procrastination is an emotional problem, not a time management one.
amygdala	the part of the brain that processes fear and threats	The amygdala perceives difficult tasks as threats to be avoided.
comfort	a pleasant state of physical or mental ease	The brain seeks comfort instead of facing stressful tasks.
dopamine	a brain chemical linked to pleasure and reward	Distractions provide small bursts of dopamine that feel good.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
cycle	a series of events that repeat in the same order	Procrastination creates a cycle of avoidance and increasing stress.
behavioural	relating to the way a person acts or behaves	Behavioural economics explains the present vs future self battle.
gratification	pleasure or satisfaction, especially immediate	The present self always wants instant gratification.
underestimates	thinks something is smaller or less important than it is	Your present self underestimates how much work your future self faces.
regret	a feeling of sadness about something you did or did not do	Chronic procrastination leads to higher levels of stress and regret.
self-esteem	confidence in your own worth and abilities	Repeated procrastination damages your self-esteem over time.
vicious cycle	a situation where one problem causes another, creating a loop	Low confidence creates a vicious cycle of avoidance and failure.
strategy	a planned method for achieving a goal	The most effective strategy is to make tasks smaller.
distractions	things that take your attention away from a task	Removing distractions like your phone makes focus much easier.

4 Useful Collocations

put off · last minute · time management · to-do list · set a deadline · lose focus · waste time · get distracted · stay motivated · break down tasks · daily routine · self-discipline · instant gratification · decision fatigue · work ethic · take action

5 Reading Comprehension

1. What percentage of university students procrastinate?

- a) About 20%
- b) About 40%
- c) About 70% ✓**
- d) About 90%

2. According to the text, procrastination is mainly what kind of problem?

- a) A time management problem
- b) An emotional problem ✓**
- c) An intelligence problem
- d) A physical health problem

3. What does the amygdala do when you face a stressful task?

- a) It helps you concentrate better
- b) It makes you feel sleepy
- c) It perceives the task as a threat and triggers avoidance ✓**
- d) It releases melatonin

4. What is the battle between 'present self' and 'future self'?

- a) A disagreement between friends
- b) A conflict between wanting comfort now and needing results later ✓**
- c) A competition between morning and evening productivity
- d) A choice between two different careers

5. What is the 'two-minute rule'?

- a) Only work for two minutes per day
- b) Take a two-minute break every hour
- c) Make the task so small it feels easy to start ✓**
- d) Set a timer for two minutes and then stop working

6. What does research say about self-criticism and procrastination?

- a) Being harder on yourself helps you stop procrastinating
- b) Self-criticism makes people procrastinate even more ✓**
- c) Self-criticism has no effect on behaviour
- d) Only students benefit from self-forgiveness

6 Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blanks

Complete the sentences with the correct word from the box:

procrastinator · consequences · dopamine · gratification · underestimates · self-esteem · vicious cycle · distractions

1. A chronic _____ regularly delays important tasks despite wanting to finish them.

2. People who procrastinate know the _____ but still struggle to start.
3. Checking your phone gives small bursts of _____ that feel good in the moment.
4. The present self always chooses instant _____ over long-term rewards.
5. Your present self _____ the amount of work your future self will need to do.
6. Repeated procrastination can seriously damage your _____ and confidence.
7. Low confidence and avoidance create a _____ that is hard to break.
8. Putting your phone in another room removes the biggest source of _____.

7 Answer Key

■ Vocabulary Exercise Answers

1. procrastinator
2. consequences
3. dopamine
4. gratification
5. underestimates
6. self-esteem
7. vicious cycle
8. distractions

8 Speaking & Writing Tasks

■ ■ Speaking Task: Discussion

Discuss these questions with a partner or your teacher:

- Are you a procrastinator? What kind of tasks do you delay most?
- Which strategy from the text do you think would work best for you? Why?
- Do you think procrastination is getting worse because of smartphones and social media?
- Some people say they work better under pressure. Do you agree, or is this just an excuse?

■ Useful Phrases for Talking About Habits

- **I tend to** put things off until the last minute, especially boring tasks.
- **What usually happens is that** I plan to start early but end up rushing at the end.
- **The main reason I procrastinate is** that the task feels overwhelming or boring.
- **What helps me stay focused is** breaking large tasks into smaller steps.
- **I have found that** working with a friend makes me much more productive.

Writing Task: My Procrastination Story

Write a paragraph (120–160 words) about this topic:

"Describe a time when you procrastinated on something important. What happened? How did you feel? What did you learn from the experience, and what would you do differently next time?"

Use vocabulary from this lesson. Be honest about your habits and reflect on which strategies might help you in the future.