



Breaking Habits

Why bad habits are hard to break and how our brains get stuck in loops

B2

Reading

Grammar

40 min

Lesson Objectives

- Read an article about the science of habit loops
- Learn vocabulary related to habits and behaviour
- Use used to and would for past habits
- Distinguish between used to, would, and past simple
- Discuss your own past and present habits
- Write about habits you have changed

1 Before You Read

- Think about a habit you have. Is it a good habit or a bad habit? How long have you had it?
- Have you ever tried to stop a bad habit? What happened?
- Why do you think some habits are so difficult to change?

2 Reading: The Science of Habit Loops

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." — Will Durant

Have you ever wondered why you automatically reach for your phone first thing in the morning, even when you have promised yourself you would stop? Or why you always crave something sweet after dinner, no matter how full you are? The answer lies in the way our brains process repeated actions — through something scientists call the habit loop.

According to Dr. Sarah Martinez, a neuroscientist at Stanford University, our brains **used to** rely on habits for basic survival. Early humans **would** repeat the same routines every day — they **would** wake before sunrise, search for food in familiar places, and return to the safety of their shelter before dark. These repetitive patterns saved energy and kept them alive. "The brain is fundamentally lazy," Dr. Martinez explains. "It **used to** look for shortcuts, and it still does."

The habit loop has three stages: the cue, the routine, and the reward. First, something triggers the behaviour — perhaps you feel stressed, and that is your cue. Then comes the routine: you **used to** smoke a cigarette, or you **would** eat a bar of chocolate. Finally, your brain receives a reward — a brief feeling of relief or pleasure. Over time, this loop becomes ingrained in your brain, and you perform the action without even thinking about it.

A recent study at University College London found that it takes an average of 66 days to form a new habit — far longer than the popular myth of 21 days. Breaking an old habit can take even longer. When James, a 34-year-old teacher from London, decided to quit smoking, he discovered just how persistent habits can be. "I **used to** smoke twenty cigarettes a day," he says. "Every morning, I **would** have one with my coffee. After lunch, I **would** step outside for another. It was completely automatic." James tried to quit four times before he finally succeeded. "What worked was replacing the routine," he explains. "Now, when I feel the cue — that urge after a meal — I go for a short walk instead."

Dr. Martinez agrees that replacement, not willpower alone, is the key. "People **used to** believe that breaking a habit was simply a matter of self-control," she says. "But we now know that you cannot just delete a habit — you have to overwrite it with a new one." She recommends identifying your cues, keeping the reward, and experimenting with different routines until you find one that sticks.

So, the next time you find yourself reaching for that midnight snack, remember: your brain is not broken. It is just running an old programme. And the good news? You have the power to rewrite it.

3 Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example
automatically	without thinking; by itself	<i>She automatically checks her email.</i>
crave	to want something very strongly	<i>I always crave chocolate when stressed.</i>
process (v)	to deal with information	<i>The brain processes millions of signals.</i>
habit loop	cycle of cue, routine, reward	<i>Understanding the loop helps change behaviour.</i>
neuroscientist	a scientist who studies the brain	<i>The neuroscientist explained memory.</i>
repetitive	done again and again	<i>Repetitive tasks become boring.</i>
fundamentally	in the most basic way	<i>The approaches are fundamentally different.</i>
cue	a signal that starts a behaviour	<i>Stress is a common cue.</i>
routine	a regular series of actions	<i>My morning routine includes exercise.</i>
reward	something good after an action	<i>The reward keeps us repeating it.</i>

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example
trigger (v)	to cause something to start	<i>Smells can trigger memories.</i>
ingrained	deeply fixed; hard to change	<i>These habits are deeply ingrained.</i>
myth	widely believed but false idea	<i>The 21-day rule is a myth.</i>
persistent	continuing; hard to stop	<i>Bad habits are surprisingly persistent.</i>
willpower	ability to control behaviour	<i>Quitting requires enormous willpower.</i>
replacing	putting new in place of old	<i>Replacing bad habits is the best strategy.</i>

Collocations & Phrases

break a habit • form a habit • old habits die hard • force of habit • kick a habit • creature of habit • deeply ingrained

4 Grammar Focus: Used to / Would

In the Text, You Saw...

- "Our brains **used to** rely on habits for basic survival."
- "Early humans **would** repeat the same routines every day."
- "I **used to** smoke twenty cigarettes a day."
- "Every morning, I **would** have one with my coffee."

We use used to and would to talk about past habits and repeated actions that are no longer true.

Form	Used to	Would
Affirmative	I used to smoke.	I would smoke every day.
Negative	I didn't use to exercise.	— (rare in negative)
Question	Did you use to play?	— (not used in questions)

USED TO — past states AND habits

- "I used to live in Paris." (state) □
- "I used to walk to school." (habit) □

WOULD — ONLY past habits (repeated actions)

- "I would walk to school every day." □
- "I would live in Paris." □ (state — cannot use would)

PAST SIMPLE — single past events

- "I walked to school yesterday." □
- "I used to walk to school yesterday." □

Key Difference

Used to = past states + past habits. Would = ONLY repeated past actions (not states like live, be, have, know, like).

△ Common Mistakes

- "I would be shy as a child." → □ "I used to be shy." (state verb)
- "I use to play tennis." → □ "I used to play tennis."
- "Did you used to smoke?" → □ "Did you use to smoke?"

5 □ Exercise: Transform the Sentence

Rewrite using 'used to' or 'would'. Remember: state verbs cannot use 'would'.

1. Now: I check social media every morning.

Past: _____

2. Now: She walks to work every day.

Past: _____

3. Now: We eat dinner at 7 pm.

Past: _____

4. Now: He lives in Tokyo.

Past: _____

5. Now: They play football on Sundays.

Past: _____

6. Now: I am afraid of the dark.

Past: _____

7. Now: She drinks three cups of coffee a day.

Past: _____

8. Now: He has a beard.

Past: _____

9. Now: We go to the beach every summer.

Past: _____

10. Now: I know all my neighbours.

Past: _____

□ Answers

1. I used to check social media every morning.
2. She would walk to work every day.
3. We used to eat dinner at 7 pm.
4. He used to live in Tokyo. (state — not would)
5. They would play football on Sundays.
6. I used to be afraid of the dark. (state — not would)
7. She would drink three cups of coffee a day.
8. He used to have a beard. (state — not would)
9. We would go to the beach every summer.
10. I used to know all my neighbours. (state — not would)

6 □ **Comprehension Quiz**

1. According to the article, what is a 'habit loop'?

- A type of exercise for the brain
- A cycle of cue, routine, and reward □
- A method for learning languages
- A loop of neurons

2. How long does it take on average to form a new habit?

- 21 days
- 30 days
- 66 days □
- 90 days

3. What strategy helped James quit smoking?

- Using willpower alone
- Taking medication
- Replacing the routine with walking □
- Avoiding social situations

4. What does Dr. Martinez say about willpower?

- It is the most effective method
- It is not enough on its own □
- It works for most people
- It takes 21 days

5. Which sentence is correct?

- I would be very shy as a child.
- I used to be very shy as a child. □
- I would to be shy.
- I use to be shy.

6. Complete: "Did you ___ play the piano?"

- used to
- use to □
- would
- would to

7. "Every evening, he ___ read before bed."

- used to
- would □
- use to
- did use to

8. Which sentence CANNOT use "would"?

- I ___ walk to school.
- I ___ play tennis.
- I ___ live in Berlin. □
- I ___ visit grandparents.

7 ⇌ Fill in the Blanks

Word box: used to • would • use to

1. I ___ eat fast food every day, but now I cook at home.
2. She ___ play the violin for hours when she was young.
3. He didn't ___ like vegetables, but now he loves them.
4. We ___ go camping every summer. Those were great times.
5. They ___ live in Brazil before they moved to Germany.
6. Did you ___ have a pet when you were a child?
7. My grandfather ___ tell us stories every night.
8. I ___ be terrified of flying, but I'm fine now.

□ **Answers:** 1. used to • 2. would • 3. use to • 4. would • 5. used to • 6. use to • 7. would • 8. used to

8 □ Speaking & Writing

□ Discussion Questions

1. What is one habit you used to have as a child that you no longer have?
2. Do you think habits are mostly formed in childhood or later in life? Why?
3. What is the most difficult habit you have ever tried to break?
4. Do you agree that 'old habits die hard'? Give an example.
5. If you could instantly break one bad habit, which would it be?

□ Example Dialogue

- A: What habits did you use to have when you were younger?
B: Well, I used to bite my nails all the time. Terrible habit!
A: Really? How did you stop?
B: I started painting my nails. Every time I would try to bite them, the taste stopped me.
A: That's clever! I used to crack my knuckles, but I still do sometimes.
B: Old habits die hard, right?

Writing Task

Write a short paragraph (80–120 words) about habits you used to have:

- What habits did you use to have as a child or teenager?
- What would you do every day that you no longer do?
- Have you replaced any old habits with new ones?

Use *used to* and *would* at least 3 times in your paragraph.

9 Review Checklist

I can now...

- understand an article about the science of habit formation
- use vocabulary related to habits and behaviour
- use *used to* for past states and past habits
- use *would* for repeated past actions
- distinguish between *used to*, *would*, and the past simple
- discuss and write about habits I have changed



Congratulations!

You have completed Lesson 1: Breaking Habits. Keep practising!