

# Multitasking or Automatic/Conscious Processing

- When to use:** When teaching about conscious versus automatic processing, cognitive load, or multitasking.
- Purpose:** To demonstrate the effects of automaticity, cognitive load, or multitasking on one's ability to successfully accomplish two tasks at once.  
Task A: Automatic Math Task + Automatic Verbal Task  
Task B: Automatic Math Task + Conscious Verbal Task  
Task C: Conscious Math Task + Conscious Verbal Task
- Task A: Low Load  
Task B: Medium Load  
Task C: High Load
- Materials:** Each person needs a Math Tasks/Verbal Tasks sheet.  
Also, a sheet with the verbal passages to be read is needed.
- Directions:** Handout the Math Tasks/Verbal Tasks sheet. Students should not look at the Verbal Tasks until after each passage has been read. Tell the students that they are to complete the first math task, and while they are completing the math task they will be read a passage. Upon completing the math task, they are to turn the paper over and complete the first verbal task. This process of math task, hear passage (simultaneously), then verbal task will be repeated for all three tasks. Score each of the verbal tasks upon completion of each, and graph on the board.
- Time:** This activity should take about 20 minutes.
- Notes:** The third math task (Task C) may take too long for some students to complete. After finishing reading the third passage, give the students about 30 seconds, or so, then tell them to turn over the paper and answer the Task C questions, even if they have not yet finished the Task C math questions.
- Results:** Typical results for each of the three tasks are as follows:  
Task A a little less than 5  
Task B around 3  
Task C around 1
- Source:** I'm pretty sure I made this activity up, however, it may be based on another activity, maybe from one of the *Activities Handbook for the Teaching of Psychology* books (volumes 1-4 by APA), but I cannot seem to find it. If you know, please let me know (Peter Doolittle, pdoo@vt.edu).



-- SIDE B --  
VERBAL TASKS

## Task A

- |                                                       |                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. What is the state of mind mentioned?               | deeply troubled          |
| 2. What is the companion mentioned in the passage?    | a dog                    |
| 3. How is the companion described?                    | silent, devoted          |
| 4. Where else can you get that kind of companionship? | nowhere else             |
| 5. What's the point of the passage?                   | dogs are good companions |
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## Task B

- |                                                                        |                                  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. What does the author urge us to do in the passage?                  | call things by their right names |
| 2. What was the original name of the drink mentioned in the passage?   | brandy and water                 |
| 3. What was the subsequent name of the drink mentioned in the passage? | liquid fire/distilled damnation  |
| 4. How many actual liquids are mentioned in the passage?               | 2 (brandy & water)               |
| 5. What was distilled in the passage?                                  | damnation                        |
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## Task C

- |                                              |                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. What is a good name like?                 | precious ointment                                                  |
| 2. Why is good name good?                    | persists (will not easily go away)                                 |
| 3. What types of odors are "more durable?"   | ointments                                                          |
| 4. Odors are more durable than what?         | flowers                                                            |
| 5. What is the general point of the passage? | keep your name "good"<br>because you name's reputation<br>persists |

# EXPERIMENT #11

## VERBAL TASK PASSAGES

1. I have found that when you are deeply troubled, there are things you get from the silent devoted companionship of a dog that you can get from no other source.
2. Call things by their right names, Glass of brandy and water! That is the current but not the appropriate name: ask for a glass of liquid fire and distilled damnation.
3. A good name is like a precious ointment; it fills all about, and will not easily go away; for the odors of ointments are more durable than those of flowers.