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COURSE · FOCUS & DEEP WORK

Lesson 02

Shallow work versus deep work

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What this lesson covers

In the first lesson you saw why switching between tasks costs more attention than it seems to. This lesson gives you a simple way to look at your working week and sort it into two kinds of work: work that needs your full attention, and work that does not. Once you can see the difference clearly, it becomes much easier to protect time for the first kind without feeling guilty about the second.

By the end of this lesson you will be able to:

- Describe the difference between deep work and shallow work in your own words
- Sort a typical week of tasks into the two groups
- Spot the tasks that look shallow but quietly need deep attention
- Decide roughly how much deep work your role really needs

Two kinds of work

Almost every job contains a mix of two very different activities.

Deep work is work that needs sustained, undivided attention and produces something of real value. Writing a proposal, analysing a set of figures, designing a plan, solving a tricky problem, learning a new skill or preparing an important conversation are all examples. If you are interrupted halfway through, you lose more than the minutes of the interruption: you lose the thread of your thinking and need time to pick it up again.

Shallow work is work that can be done while partly distracted and that does not usually create much new value on its own. Answering routine messages, booking meetings, filling in standard forms, filing documents, checking updates and many small administrative tasks fall into this group. Shallow work is not bad or useless. Much of it is necessary, and some of it is the glue that keeps a team working. The point is that it does not need your best attention.

> Deep work moves your work forward. Shallow work keeps it running. You need both, but they need different conditions.

A simple test

When you are not sure which group a task belongs to, ask yourself three questions:

1. **Would a capable person new to my role need weeks of training to do this well?** If yes, the task probably uses skills and judgement that need focus.

2. **If I am interrupted every ten minutes, does the quality drop sharply?** If yes, it is deep work.
3. **Will this still matter in a month?** Work with a lasting result is more often deep work than work that disappears as soon as it is done.

If you answer yes to two or three of these questions, treat the task as deep work. If you answer no to all three, it is shallow work. Tasks in between are often a mixture, which brings us to the next point.

Mixed tasks and hidden deep work

Some tasks look shallow from the outside but contain a small, important part that needs real thought. A reply to a client complaint, for example, looks like an ordinary e-mail. But deciding what to offer, how to word a difficult message and how to keep the relationship healthy is deep work. Writing the reply quickly between two meetings is how mistakes happen.

The same is true for meetings. Attending a weekly status meeting is mostly shallow. Preparing the agenda for a meeting where an important decision will be made is deep.

A useful habit is to split mixed tasks into two parts:

- **The thinking part:** deciding what to say, what to recommend or what the plan is. Give this part focused time.
- **The doing part:** typing it up, sending it, scheduling it. This part can be done in a shallow block.

Example

Maria manages a small customer team. Every month she sends a short performance summary to her director. She used to write it on Friday afternoons between other messages, and it often took two hours and still felt rushed. After this lesson she split the task: twenty minutes of focused thinking on Thursday morning to decide the three main messages, and thirty minutes on Friday to write and send it. The summary became shorter, clearer and took less time in total.

Why the difference matters

When deep and shallow tasks are mixed together across the day, two things tend to happen.

First, shallow work expands. Messages and small requests arrive constantly, and they are easy to start. Because they give a quick sense of progress, they fill every gap in the calendar. By the end of the day you have been busy for eight hours but the important project has not moved.

Second, deep work gets pushed into the wrong hours. It is left for late afternoon, the evening or the weekend, when energy is lower and the work feels heavier than it should. Over time this creates the feeling that important work is always stressful.

Seeing your tasks in two groups is the first step to changing this. You cannot protect time for deep work until you can name it.

> You do not need to remove shallow work. You need to stop it from taking the hours your deep work needs.

How much deep work does your role need?

Different roles need very different amounts of deep work. A researcher, writer or analyst may need most of their week for focused work. A team leader or customer manager may need only a few focused hours, with the rest of the week spent on conversations, coordination and quick decisions. Both are fine.

A rough guide:

- **Creator roles** (writing, designing, analysing, building): often 50 to 70 percent deep work
- **Mixed roles** (project manager, specialist with team duties): often 25 to 50 percent
- **Coordinating roles** (team lead, operations, customer service lead): often 10 to 25 percent

These numbers are not targets. They are a starting point for an honest question: is the amount of deep work you currently manage close to what your role really needs? Many people discover a large gap. A specialist whose role needs around half the week for focused work may be getting less than one focused hour a day.

Common mistakes

Treating all shallow work as a waste of time. Some shallow work, like a quick reply that unblocks a colleague, has high value. The aim is to batch it and give it the right time, not to ignore it.

Labelling a task as deep because it is unpleasant. A task can be boring or difficult without needing deep attention. Long expense reports are tedious, but they are usually shallow.

Trying to do deep work in very short gaps. Twenty minutes between two meetings is rarely enough to get into a complex task. Use short gaps for shallow work, and plan longer blocks for deep work. You will design these blocks in lesson 4.

Forgetting recovery. Deep work is tiring. Most people can manage between one and four hours of truly focused work a day. Planning eight hours of deep work only leads to disappointment.

Summary

- Deep work needs sustained attention and creates lasting value. Shallow work can be done while partly distracted and keeps things running.
- Use the three-question test to sort unclear tasks.
- Split mixed tasks into a thinking part (deep) and a doing part (shallow).
- Different roles need different amounts of deep work. Estimate what your role needs and compare it with your current week.

Exercise: sort your week

Take 15 minutes for this exercise. Use the workbook page "Lesson 2: My work in two groups" or a sheet of paper.

1. List the 15 to 20 tasks you did most often last week.
2. Mark each task D (deep), S (shallow) or M (mixed), using the three-question test.
3. For every M task, write down the thinking part and the doing part separately.
4. Estimate how many hours of deep work you did last week, and how many your role really needs.
5. Write one sentence about the biggest gap you notice.

Next lesson

In lesson 3 you will keep a one-week focus log. It shows when and where you concentrate best, so that you can place your deep work in the hours that suit it.