Karen Anderson

Here's a test: See if you can read this article while doing something else

Many of us feel that we've got a real knack for multi-tasking and would not be nearly as successful without it. Club columnist Karen Anderson has a different perspective.

Does multi-tasking make you more efficient?

If so, my congratulations. For me, it's the complete opposite – though of course that never stops me from trying.

I know that, from a mathematical perspective, multi-tasking makes great sense. If you have three tasks that each take 10 minutes, and you perform those three tasks sequentially, you will have spent a total of 30 minutes. Multi-tasking proponents point out that if you set things up so that you can perform those three tasks simultaneously, the work will require only 10 minutes – making you three times as efficient. Who could resist?

The first flaw in this argument involves the concept of "set up." The second, and more serious, flaw involves the concept of "clean up"– something that I will surely have to do after my ill-considered attempt to simultaneously mix the cake batter, toast the coconut flakes, and talk on the phone with my mother.

"What? Aunt Edna's daughter told cousin Mark not to show his face at her wedding?"

I stop mixing the batter as this fascinating saga unfolds. Soon the smell of burning coconut fills the kitchen. I set down the phone, tiptoe over to the oven and pull out the cookie tray filled with blackened flakes.

"Karen? Karen? Are you there?" My mother's voice calls from the phone on the table.

Setting the hot tray of ruined coconut on the stove top, I pick up the phone and sink into a chair.

"Now, as I was saying," Mom continues. Just as the tale of the wedding debacle reaches its high point, I spot the cat on the far side the kitchen. It's dipping its paws into my cake batter, which will soon, like my carefully planned morning of multi-tasking, be going down the drain.

Research studies on multi-tasking all come to the same discouraging conclusion: Multi-tasking is a great way to make a mess of things . . . like trying to get some work done while simultaneously having a conversation. You end up making pseudo-conversational noises to give the person who's talking a glimmer of hope that you're paying attention.

When their voice rises at the end of the sentence, indicating a question, you go "Hmmmm."

When the voice pauses, signaling a conclusion, you say "O.K. "or "Got it." But eventually, you will get caught.

An attorney of my acquaintance found this out in the courtroom. While the presiding judge was lecturing the two teams of lawyers about her views on a dry procedural issue, my friend got busy preparing his notes for the next cross-examination.

"Hmmm," he muttered at appropriate intervals as the voice from the bench went on and on.

He was vaguely aware that the voice had stopped yakking, and figured it was time to acknowledge the lecture.

"Yes, dear," he said cheerfully, and kept working away on his notes. The courtroom fell oddly silent. He looked up to see the court reporter grinning widely as she carefully typed "Yes, dear" into the permanent case record.

No matter how embarrassing the consequences, it's nearly impossible to break the multi-tasking habit, yours, or anyone else's. Driving home from the grocery store last week I saw a fellow walking briskly down the sidewalk with his nose buried deep in a book.

"That's going to end badly," I muttered, and then realized the perambulating reader was none other than my partner, The Scholarly Gentleman.

"You can't read and walk!" I said when he got home, to which he gave the predictable response "Of course I can. I've been doing it for years."

While putting away the groceries, I launched into my lecture about the hazards of uneven sidewalks, telephone poles and pet waste. Busily multi-tasking, I failed to notice that the Scholarly Gentleman once again had his nose deep in some reading material.

I thought he was paying attention to my rant until, when I finally wound down, he uttered the telltale phrase of the incurable multi-tasker:

"Yes, dear."