

Information overload

1a Work in pairs. Discuss the questions.

- a) What mobile device do you use and what tasks do you use it for?
- b) When did you last go on social media and what did you do?
- c) What profile picture are you currently using? Are you happy with it?
- d) Have you ever checked social media in the middle of a class?



1b Check your grammar! What does each question ask about? Match the questions and the actions.

- a) regular activity
- b) an experience at an unspecified time in the past
- c) something happening now
- d) an activity at a specified point in the past

2a Look at these sentences from an online news feature. What words do you think were in the original article?

- a) There has been a dramatic in the amount of time we spend on our devices.
- b) A has found that one in four people admits to spending more time online than they spend asleep.
- c) A telecommunications company commissioned the report earlier
- d) The average person checks their smartphone 150 times
- e) Psychologists have been warning us about the risks of information overload
- f) Many of us are starting to show symptoms of addiction.

2b Look at the sentences again. What tenses are used in each sentence?

3 Read the Grammar reference and complete the information with the phrases in the box.

- present perfect continuous
- give news of recent events
- recent studies
- which the speaker views as more long-term
- leads up to now
- with questions beginning *How long ...?*
- may be understood or implied

Grammar reference: present perfect

Use the present perfect to refer to events which took place in a period of time that started in the past and (1) This period of time is unfinished, e.g. *I've only had this phone since last week*. The present perfect can refer to an event that has happened once or several times, e.g. *I've had three new phones this year*.

- These events may be very recent or the speaker may feel that they are very relevant to the present. The present perfect is often used to (2), e.g. *Scientists have discovered that modern technology may change the way our brains work*.
- Time expressions may be used, or the time period (3) by the speaker or writer, e.g. *There has been growing concern over our use of technology (over the last few years)*.
- In academic essays, we can use the present perfect to refer to (4) or generally accepted theories. The present simple is also common, e.g. *A report has found ... / Research shows ...* (active) *It has been argued that ... / It is thought that ...* (passive). Use the present perfect to describe current trends and developments. This is particularly useful in a topic sentence at the start of a paragraph, e.g. *There has been a dramatic increase in the amount of time we spend on our devices*.

Present perfect simple or present perfect continuous?

- Use the present perfect continuous to place greater emphasis on the duration of the activity. The activity can be continuous or repeated and is often ongoing or has only recently stopped, e.g. *She's been checking her phone for the last half hour.* The present perfect continuous is preferred (5) , e.g. *How long has this been going on?*
- Use the present perfect simple to focus on something completed or talk about how often we have done something, e.g. *We're very pleased with the work that has been done. I've phoned her three times already!*
- Sometimes the choice of the simple or continuous form depends on the view of the speaker or writer. The (6) may be used for an event the speaker considers temporary, e.g. *I haven't been focussing on my work recently.* The simple form can be used to talk about situations (7) , e.g. *He's worked at the same place for a while.*

4 Complete the gaps in the text about information overload. Use an appropriate tense of the verb in brackets. More than one answer is sometimes possible.

Grammar tip

Some verbs are not common in the continuous form, e.g. *appear, believe, hear, know, think, seem*, e.g. *I haven't heard (been hearing) from him for a long time.*

For many years concern (1) (*increase*) about the stress caused by digital devices. In the workplace, technology (2) (*not / bring*) us the much anticipated reduced workload. In fact, technological innovations (3) (*set up*) even greater expectations of what can be achieved. Current research (4) (*suggest*) that information overload affects not only our personal well-being but also our productivity. A recent study (5) (*demonstrate*) that it takes people an average of twenty-five minutes to return to a work task after an email interruption.

Over the last few decades a number of studies (6) (*publish*) claiming that the quantity of information we receive will one day become too much. The term 'information overload' first (7) (*appear*) as long ago as 1970. Some of the claims may be exaggerated. People (8) (*complain*) about excessive information since the printing revolution in the fifteenth century. It seems unimaginable now that people in Victorian times (9) (*worry*) about the effect the invention of the telegraph had on the businessman.

Nevertheless, there are some major areas of concern about the current information age, including the effect that the information load has on our health. Receiving content in countless formats (10) (*constantly / put*) us under mental strain. Scientists (11) (*discover*) that multi-taskers produce more stress hormones. Lack of focus also effects creativity. Harvard Business School (12) (*monitor*) people's work habits for a number of years. Their ongoing research (13) (*show*) that people are more likely to be creative if they are allowed to focus without interruptions. Overload can also make workers less productive. A researcher from the University of Michigan, (14) (*prove*) that people who complete certain tasks in parallel take much longer and make more errors than people who complete the same tasks in sequence.

5 Work in pairs. Discuss the questions.

- How many times have you checked your phone today?
- How much time do you spend online on an average day?
- Have you ever felt stressed by technology?
- The concept of a digital detox has been gaining in popularity in recent years. Why do you think this is?

Grammar tip

In American English, the past simple is often preferred to the present perfect and is sometimes used in sentences which would not be considered correct in British English, e.g. *Did you finish yet? (US) Have you finished yet? (UK)*

6 Read the Grammar reference and the blog entry about a digital detox. Circle the present perfect or past simple in the blog. Sometimes both tenses are possible depending on how you view the events.

Grammar reference: present perfect

Present perfect or past simple?

- Some time expressions commonly associated with the present perfect are: *during/in/over the last ... , in my life, lately, so far, to date, until now, since ... , it's the (first) time ... , ... yet.*
- Some time expressions which commonly take either the present perfect or past simple, are: *already, for ... , just, once, ... before, recently, this (morning), today.* The past simple is used for time periods which are considered finished, and the choice of tense often depends on how the speaker or writer views the time period.

Surviving without technology 19 comments

(1) *I've recently started / I recently started* a three-week digital detox. Over the last year, (2) *I've become / I became* increasingly aware of how much I rely on digital devices in both my personal and professional life. As a millennial – (3) *I've celebrated / I celebrated* the start of the 21st century when I was still at college – (4) *I've been feeling / I felt* daunted by the idea of surviving without technology. Luckily, my digital detox coach (5) *has advised / advised me* immediately that millennials should not feel bad about their use of technology. Technology is something we (6) *have grown up / grew up* with.



Soon after the programme started, (7) *I've turned off / I turned off* notifications on my phone for all apps. (8) *Have I missed / Did I miss* the apps at all? If I'm honest, no. This week (9) *I've installed / I installed* a filter to keep my email inbox in check and (10) *I've reduced / I reduced* the number of times I check my emails every day. My detox (11) *has already given / already gave* me a feeling of being back in control. Since starting the detox two weeks ago, (12) *I've been sleeping / I slept* better and (13) *I haven't woken up / didn't wake up* to check my phone once. Today (14) *I've come / I came* to the conclusion that it's not about unplugging your technology but creating better habits around it. (15) *I've never thought / I never thought* about technology in this way before.

EXAM TASK: Speaking (Part 2)

7 Prepare answers to the questions. In pairs, take turns to talk about the topic for one to two minutes.

Describe a digital device or digital software which you find irreplaceable.

You should say:

- what the device or software is
 - how long you have been using it
 - what effect it has had on your life or the way you study
- and explain why you would recommend it to a friend.

EXAM TASK: Speaking (Part 3)

8 Work in pairs. Discuss the questions.

- What effects have digital technology had on the way we work?
- Do companies have a responsibility to help their employees cope with information?
- Have you ever considered unplugging your technology?