

Why Saying No Is a Productivity Superpower

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

308 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

Have you ever said yes to something... and felt your stomach sink the second the word left your mouth?

Oh, I know that feeling exactly.

That tiny voice inside asking, "Why did I just agree to that?"

And then you spend the next three weeks paying for one small word.

Welcome to Your English Toolbox, the podcast that trains your English while you live your real life.

I am Martin.

And I am Julia.

Friends, last time we talked about eating your frog first.

Doing the important, difficult task before the small, comfortable tasks take over your day.

Today, we are looking at the other side of that idea.

Not doing more.

Doing less... but choosing better.

Because Julia has a story about the most expensive yes of her life.

Go on.

Tell them.

About a year ago, a friend asked me to help organise a small charity event.

She said, "It will only take a few hours."

Famous last words.

Famous last words, exactly.

Because I said yes... and then I said yes to the next thing, and the next.

By the end, I was spending six hours a week on something I had never really chosen.

Six hours, every single week, for four months.

It did not feel like one big decision.

It felt like ten tiny decisions.



And that is often how our time disappears.

By the end of this episode, you will know how to identify the tasks that deserve your time and how to protect your yes so it actually means something.

You will also learn how to turn people down in natural English without sounding cold or rude.

And we will give you a simple exercise you can use today.

Let us start with a useful rule of thumb.

The eighty-twenty rule.

Imagine that you have ten tasks on your list today.

Ten different things you could do.

Some of those tasks will create much more value than the others.

Perhaps two of them will produce most of the result that really matters.

That is the basic idea behind the eighty-twenty rule.

But it is important to say this clearly.

It is a rule of thumb, not a mathematical promise.

Exactly.

Life does not always divide itself perfectly into eighty and twenty.

The useful question is not, "Are these numbers exact?"

The useful question is, "Which small number of actions creates most of my meaningful progress?"

For example, imagine that you are preparing a presentation in English.

You could spend an hour choosing colours for the slides.

You could move every little icon three millimetres to the left.

You could reorganise the file names.

All very important, obviously.

Obviously.

Or you could practise the opening aloud and make sure your main message is clear.

That short practice may create far more value than all the cosmetic work.

So the principle is not about worshipping a number.

It is about recognising unequal value.

Not every task deserves the same amount of your attention.

And that was the problem with the charity event.

Tell them why you kept saying yes, Julia.



Honestly?

Because saying no felt rude.

Every time my friend asked for just one more small thing, it felt easier to agree than to disappoint her.

And each yes seemed small on its own.

Exactly.

But six small yeses, every week, for months... that is not small anymore.

That is a second job you never applied for.

A job with no interview and no pay.

Here is a question worth asking about anything that regularly uses your time.

If you were not already doing it, and you looked at it honestly today, would you choose to start?

That is such a strange question to ask yourself.

It is, but it can be very revealing.

Because sometimes we continue doing something simply because we have already started.

Not because it is still valuable.

And that is a trap.

A very human trap.

So, what actually happened?

Did you continue for the full four months?

No. My partner finally said something.

He said, "You complain about this every single Tuesday night.

Why do you not just say no?"

And that stopped me completely, because he was right.

I had not even considered saying no as a real option.

So what did you do?

The next week, I called my friend.

And what did you say?

I said, "I have realised I cannot keep doing this every week.

I can help once more, but then I need to step back."

And how did she react?

She said, "That is completely fine.



I was worried I was asking too much, but I did not know how to say it.”

She sounded relieved too.

You had both been trapped in the same polite little agreement.

Both too polite to say what we actually needed.

That happens more often than we realise.

People assume that everyone else wants the arrangement to continue.

So nobody says anything, and it just keeps going.

Until someone finally breaks the pattern.

And once I said no to that one thing, I had six hours back every week.

Six hours to spend on what?

On the two or three things that actually mattered to me.

My own frogs, if we want to use the expression from the last episode.

There we go.

So saying no to the wrong thing is really saying yes to the right thing.

That is the whole idea in one sentence.

Now, deciding what matters can feel overwhelming if you do not have a system.

Tell them about your letters, Martin.

Every morning, I look at my list and give each task a letter.

Explain the letters.

A means it truly matters.

There are real consequences if I do not do it.

If you have more than one A, you number them: A-one, A-two and A-three.

B means it is worth doing, but the consequences of skipping it are mild.

A small annoyance, not a serious problem.

Exactly.

A B task is a tadpole, not a frog.

I love that.

C means it would be nice to do, but little changes if you leave it undone.

D means someone else could do it instead of you.

And E means you could eliminate it without losing anything important.



The rule is simple: do not choose a B task while an A task is still waiting.

Even if the B task feels more comfortable.

Especially then.

Comfort is often why we choose the wrong task.

It is easier to answer a friendly message than to sit with something difficult.

But let us make this practical.

Imagine that this is my list for today.

I am ready.

First, send a proposal to a client before the deadline at three o'clock.

That sounds like an A.

Definitely A-one.

There is a real deadline and a real consequence.

Second, answer a friendly message about meeting for coffee next week.

Worth doing, but it can wait.

B.

Third, redesign the colour labels in my calendar because I suddenly dislike the green one.

Martin.

I know.

That is an E wearing a very attractive little hat.

Fine.

E.

Fourth, collect a package from a shop before it closes.

Could somebody else collect it?

Yes.

My brother is passing the shop this afternoon.

Then it could be D.

Delegate it, if he is happy to help.

And fifth, book a routine appointment that is not urgent but should happen this month.

Probably B.

Important enough to schedule, but not before the client proposal.



So the list looks completely different now.

The same five tasks are still there, but they no longer have equal weight.

And I no longer need to decide between them every five minutes.

You begin with A-one.

Then you move through the list deliberately.

And D does not mean throwing work at another person without asking.

Good point.

Delegating means agreeing clearly about who will do something, what the result should be and when it is needed.

And E does not mean avoiding your responsibilities.

It means removing an activity that does not serve a useful purpose.

Perhaps you check the same statistics twelve times a day.

Perhaps you attend a meeting where you never contribute and never receive information you need.

Or perhaps you keep improving a document that was already good enough yesterday.

Those tasks can feel satisfying because they are easy to finish.

Finishing anything gives us a small feeling of progress.

Even when the activity itself did not matter.

So we can feel productive while our real priorities remain untouched.

That is the trap hiding inside the method.

It is not enough to organise your list beautifully.

You still have to begin with A-one.

Even when it is the hardest item to look at.

If we return to your charity event, what letter was it really?

Looking back, probably a C.

It was nice to help, but it was not one of my central responsibilities.

And yet it was taking hours away from your A tasks.

That is the danger.

A C task disguised as an obligation can quietly steal time from an A task.

Once you name the letter, the decision often becomes clearer.

But there is still one difficult moment.

Actually saying no.



Exactly.

So let us practise the English.

Suppose I ask you this: Martin, could you organise the whole event next Saturday?

I could simply say, "No."

You could.

It is clear.

But it may sound too abrupt in a friendly situation.

Try this instead: "I would love to help, but I cannot commit to that right now."

I would love to help, but I cannot commit to that right now.

Warm, honest and clear.

Notice that I am not inventing a dramatic excuse.

And you are not saying maybe when you already know the answer is no.

What if I can help a little, but not with everything?

Then set a boundary around your yes.

"I can help with the invitations, but I cannot take on the whole event."

That is useful.

A smaller, specific yes inside a larger no.

Exactly.

You offer what you can genuinely give.

Not what you hope you might somehow find time to give.

Now imagine that you are not sure yet.

This is where many people say yes because they feel pressure to answer immediately.

But you are allowed to create a little space.

Say, "Let me check my priorities and get back to you this afternoon."

Let me check my priorities and get back to you this afternoon.

That is not avoidance if you give a clear time for your answer.

It is a pause for a real decision.

And if you have already said yes but the situation has become unsustainable?

You can use the expression from your story.

"I need to step back from this."



Then add the practical detail.

"I can finish this week, but after Friday I need to step back."

That gives the other person useful information.

It also prevents a vague promise from continuing forever.

Let us try one more situation.

Your manager gives you another urgent task, but your day is already full.

In that situation, a direct no may not be possible.

So what can you say?

"I can do this today.

Which of my current priorities would you like me to move?"

That is excellent.

You are not refusing responsibility.

You are making the cost of the new request visible.

Because time is limited, even at work.

And sometimes the answer is not no.

Sometimes it is not now.

Or not all of it.

Or not without changing another priority.

That distinction matters.

We are not suggesting that you should refuse every difficult request.

Family responsibilities, emergencies and important professional duties cannot always be placed in a simple box.

And helping another person can be one of the most valuable uses of your time.

The point is to choose consciously.

Not to let guilt or habit make every decision for you.

There is one more question that can help.

Will this matter in a year?

Thinking further ahead can help us see the real cost of a yes.

If I had asked myself that question before accepting the charity work, I think I already knew the answer.

It can cut through a lot of noise.

And it works both ways.



What do you mean?

Sometimes a small action today will matter enormously in a year.

Calling somebody you love.

Beginning a healthy habit.

Studying English for twenty focused minutes instead of spending an hour jumping between apps.

So the question is not only a tool for saying no.

It is a tool for seeing more clearly.

Now it is your turn.

Think of one request you have received recently.

Do not answer it yet.

Just bring it to mind.

Ask yourself three questions.

First: what will I have less time for if I say yes?

Second: if I were not already doing this, would I choose to begin now?

Third: will this matter in a year?

Your answer may still be yes.

And if it is, let it be a real yes.

But if the answer is no, choose one of our sentences.

"I would love to help, but I cannot commit to that right now."

"I can help with this part, but I cannot take on the whole project."

"Let me check my priorities and get back to you this afternoon."

Or, "I need to step back from this after Friday."

Clear language makes a difficult decision easier to communicate.

Now, before we recap, let us gather the useful English from today.

First: famous last words.

We use this when somebody makes a confident statement that later proves completely wrong.

"I will only check one email."

Famous last words."

Next: a trap.

A situation that seems harmless or attractive but creates a problem.



“Doing easy tasks first can become a productivity trap.”

Next: to step back.

To reduce your involvement in an activity or responsibility.

“After the event, she decided to step back from the committee.”

Next: relieved.

The comfortable feeling you have when a worry or difficult situation disappears.

“I felt relieved when she accepted my decision.”

Next: to disguise something.

To hide its true nature or make it look like something different.

“The unnecessary task was disguised as an urgent one.”

Next: to cut through the noise.

To find what is important in a confusing situation.

“One honest question helped me cut through the noise.”

Next: to commit to something.

To promise your time, energy or support to it.

“I cannot commit to another weekly meeting.”

And finally: to take something on.

To accept a task or responsibility.

“I can help, but I cannot take on the whole project.”

Eight useful expressions from one real conversation.

Now, here is your sentence of the day.

Listen carefully.

We will say it twice.

“Say no to the wrong thing, so you can say yes to the right one.”

“Say no to the wrong thing, so you can say yes to the right one.”

Say it with us, out loud, if you can.

Feel the rhythm.

“Say no... to the wrong thing.”

“So you can say yes... to the right one.”

Let us bring everything together.



Somewhere on your list, there may be a C task wearing an A task's clothes.

Find it.

Name it.

Then decide whether to do it, delegate it, reduce it or let it go.

And if you need to say no, use clear and respectful English.

Because your real A task deserves your time and attention.

Thank you for spending this time with us today.

You can continue learning with this episode at yourenglishtoolbox.com.

Read the transcript while you listen, compare the translations, review the vocabulary and choose the listening speed that helps you understand without pressure.

The direct link is in the episode description.

Until next time, friends.

Take care of yourselves.

And protect your yes.

Goodbye!

