

# Division of Labor–Taking Advantage of Efficiency

**SUBMITTED BY:** Michael Ryan Moore, University of Pennsylvania, GSE

**SUBJECT(S):** Economics

**GRADE LEVEL(S):** 9, 10, 11, 12

## ≡ OVERVIEW:

In this lesson we will look at the concept of division of labor. Through a short in-class activity, students will demonstrate the value and efficiency of specialization. Next, students will think about division of labor when it comes to group work, thinking about their own strengths and weaknesses, and how best to use those skills in a group setting. Finally, using the article “A Piece of Cake? Hardly, but Autumn Bayles Helped Herself, and Others, Rise to the Top,” students will think about how the division of labor encourages trade within the market.

## ≡ NBEA STANDARD(S):

- Economics, I. Allocation of Resources
- Economics, IV. Markets and Prices

## ≡ RELATED ARTICLES:

- [“Why Germany Is the Driving Force in the Eurozone”](#)
- [“Insights from the Fall of Aleppo”](#)
- [“Are We Sinking into an Economic Recession?”](#)
- [“A Student Draws Inspiration from the Dabbawalas of Mumbai”](#)
- [“A Piece of Cake? Hardly, but Autumn Bayles Helped Herself, and Others, Rise to the Top”](#)

**Common Core Standard(s):**

- Mathematics (N-Q), “Reason quantitatively and use units to solve problems”

**Objectives/Purposes:** The purpose of this lesson is for students to understand specialization and the *division of labor*.

- Students will be able to explain what *division of labor* means.
- Students will be able to explain why specialization of labor is valuable to an economy.
- Students will think about their own strengths and weaknesses, and how they might specialize their own labor in a group setting.

**Other Resources/Materials:**

For Teachers:

- Internet Access (Outside of the Classroom)
- Printer/Copier
- Access to Chalkboard/Whiteboard
- Chart Paper
- Markers

**Activity:**

The lesson is divided into five parts: (1) Introduction, (2) Group Activity, (3) Guided Reading, (4) Exploration Activity, and finally (5) Closing

**1. Introduction (10-15 mins)**

Begin the lesson by introducing students to the idea of “labor” as an input of supply. Whenever a company supplies goods or services, there are many “inputs” involved. For example, when selling clothing, you must think of the raw material, the physical capital (sewing machines, a store, etc.), and of course, the actual workers (or labor). Today’s lesson is a lesson on labor. Before moving into definitions, have the students take part in a small demonstration. For this demonstration there will be two teams. The first team is a group of 4 students. The second team will have just a single student. Everyone else in the class will observe.

For this activity, give both teams 2 markers and a stack of paper. The teams will have 1 minute to make as many booklets as they can. In order to make a booklet, you must take a piece of paper, fold it in half, fold it a second time, write “front” on the front cover with one colored marker, and write “back” on the back cover with a different colored marker.

The group with one student must do each of these 4 steps alone. The other group should split up the tasks. One person will fold the paper a single time. A second person will fold the paper a second time. A third person will write “front.” And a fourth person will write “back.”

After the 1-minute competition, debrief with the students. What happened? Which team made more booklets? Why? Did the team with 4 people make 4 times as many booklets as the solo-team? Why or why not?

Use this activity to introduce students to the concept of *division of labor*. In economics, division of labor involves splitting a task into discrete parts, so that each laborer can specialize on a single part. This specialization usually increases efficiency. Give students an example (e.g. farming). Is it more efficient to plant crops, care for cattle, and raise chickens? Or is it more efficient to specialize?

Ask students to come up with their own examples. Where do they see the division of labor in their own lives? Try to get students to think concretely about when and where division of labor makes sense. What kinds of jobs usually break work into small, discrete chunks? On the other hand, when does the division of labor not make sense? Usually when a task requires everyone to have a cohesive and comprehensive understanding, it is not a good idea to divide up the labor.

## 2. Group Activity (10 mins)

Split the class into small groups. Each group should be no more than 4-5 students. In this activity, the groups should think about a hypothetical situation. Assume that each group will eventually be responsible for creating a business plan. (Students will not actually make this plan today). If the business plan is due in two weeks, what roles will each student take? Before answering, groups should think about all the different types of work that needs to be done. Next, students should think about their own strengths and weaknesses. What job can I do best?

Have the groups share out after their work time.

## 3. Guided Reading (5-10 mins)

Next, have students read through the article, “[A Piece of Cake? Hardly, but Autumn Bayles Helped Herself, and Others, Rise to the Top.](#)” As students read, encourage them to think about Autumn Bayles’ advice to employees. How does her advice relate to this idea of *division of labor*?

Have students briefly summarize the reading. Use the question above to start a short dialogue about Autumn Bayles’ suggestions for putting oneself on the job market.

#### 4. Exploration Activity (10 mins)

With the remaining time, give each student a copy of the attached [worksheet](#). Students will work through several examples, looking at how the division of labor creates efficiencies in the economy.

After students work, briefly go over the worksheet together.

#### 5. Closing (1-5 mins)

Close the discussion by briefly summarizing the division of labor. When a task is well-defined, and made up of multiple, discrete activities, it is often efficient to divide the labor into distinct jobs. This division of labor can benefit multiple parties.

#### **Practice Outside of the Classroom:**

Have students look for examples of division of labor in their own lives. These examples can be economic or non-economic. What kinds of specialization do they see? Is it beneficial? Why or why not?

#### **What Worked and What I Would Do Differently:**

There are several videos on YouTube that provide examples of the division of labor. In particular, a search for “Taylorism” or “scientific management,” will yield several helpful results.