

Time Management and Procrastination

There are no right or wrong ways to manage time, but most of us share certain tendencies. Most of us, for instance, are more productive with short stretches of about two hours than with long stretches of, say, ten hours at a time. This is why we dawdle for entire afternoons when we block out whole weekends for a single assignment! On the other hand, everyone is different, and these differences shape what's feasible for each person. If eating makes you sleepy, don't leave all of your Calculus problems for after dinner. If you have never been able to get up before 8 AM, it makes no sense to create a schedule that has you up and running at 6 AM.

The key to managing your time effectively, then, is to know yourself and to develop a work routine that is tailored to you, rather than to a superhuman version of you. Here are some pointers to keep in mind as you go about this.

Schedule the Essentials, then Schedule Around Them

An effective way to map out your semester is to first write in all of your fixed commitments, so that you can clearly see what hours, days, and weeks are and aren't available for other tasks. Here are some examples of regular, fixed commitments. Can you think of others?

- eating, sleeping, working out, studying, commuting, attending classes (daily)
- work and volunteer shifts, household chores, lecture and tutorial times (weekly)
- essay deadlines, midterm and exam dates, appointments (monthly)
- birthdays, medical checkups, year-end campus events (annually)

To build around these essentials, you'll need a monthly calendar that allows you to clearly see what's approaching in the next few weeks, as well as a daily agenda planner with hourly slots that you can fill in with a pencil. When planning study sessions, aim for a work-to-break time ratio of about 5:1 (e.g., 50 minutes of study followed by a 10-minute break).

Break Tasks Down and Set Specific Goals

Is it more helpful to write *"Friday: study pharmacology"* or *"Friday, 1:30 – 3:30 PM: rewrite this week's PCL 302 lecture notes"* on your list of things to do? Which of these goals is more likely to lead to a focused, productive study session that will allow for a relaxed Friday evening? We tend to procrastinate under the following conditions:

- When our goals are not specific and measurable (e.g., how will you know when your studying is complete for the day?)
- When we don't break tasks down into smaller steps that can be completed during the scattered hours available to us on a day-to-day basis.
- When, instead, we think we can or need to complete complex tasks in a single sitting (e.g., allocating nine consecutive hours to drafting a ten-page essay).
- When we don't allow ourselves to take short breaks after each hour of study, at the end of the workday, and at the end of the workweek.

The Perfect Time Will Never Arrive

When we procrastinate, it is often because we have such high standards for ourselves that we feel we can't make effective use of small chunks of time. We put the work off, waiting for a golden stretch of uninterrupted time with which to get the work done—but this golden opportunity never materializes. When deadlines loom, and we no longer have the luxury of achieving the quality we'd envisioned, we are finally able to let go of perfectionist standards and start working. Think, though, about what this means: if we'd discarded those perfectionist standards at the outset, we would have had much more time to begin with, and the quality of our output would have been better.

Harness the Power of Routine

Studying is cumulative and learning is based on regular review. To get the full benefit of your classes—and to ensure you won't be pulling all-nighters before exams—budget at least two hours of work time for every hour of class time. Take a look at the available time in your planners and try to devote the same times each week to the same courses (e.g., Tuesday evenings are for Organic Chemistry, and Thursday afternoons are for Canadian Literature). To make this easier, go to bed at roughly the same time every night, try to eat at the same times every day, and develop reading and writing routines that force you to engage with small chunks of material on a regular basis.

Your Environment Matters

Create a workspace where you won't be distracted, and where you can spread out books and notes. Equip it with everything you might need to get work done: pens, highlighters, a notepad, sticky notes, and so on. If you tend to be interrupted by texts, turn your phone off and put it in your backpack, where you can't see it. Bookmark course websites and academic search engines, and keep your login credentials and passwords within reach.

Your Health Matters

Sleep, nutrition, and exercise are crucial to academic success. Eating junk food and not getting enough physical activity will make you tired and listless, and most of us need to be rested and alert to tackle challenging material. This is why it's rarely a good idea to crack open a textbook at midnight with the aim of completing a problem set before you go to bed. It's more likely that you'll still be on the third problem at 2:00 AM—and exhausted in your 9:00 AM class.

Learn to Say No

Discuss your workload with your friends, family, and supervisors: tell them which parts of your workweek are reserved for studying, and stick to this schedule. If you're heavily involved in extracurriculars, learn to delegate. You don't have to design every poster, serve on every committee, or spearhead every initiative. You cannot be all things to all people.

Be Kind to Yourself

Don't beat yourself up for starting your reading at noon when you had planned to start at 9 AM. What matters is that you are reading. Stumbles like this are helpful messengers that teach us more about ourselves and allow us to craft more realistic schedules in the future.