

The Importance of Time Management

You may have found that time management in college is very different from anything you have experienced previously. Success requires extensive work on your own, with far less structure than high school education, and even less structure than many jobs. Instructors care about your progress, but they will not manage your time for you. Add in the pressures of family, finances, and other responsibilities, and the priorities become extensive and difficult to manage.

Online learning can be even more challenging. The necessary hours, pages, and practice may be similar to face-to-face education, but the structure, medium, and methods vary greatly.

Managing time involves accurately predicting how much time it will take to do a task, and then setting aside that amount of time to complete it. Managing time is much more difficult than it may seem, which is why there are entire courses of study and research on the best approaches. But if you develop a method to undertake each component, you'll be successful.



How Long Will It Take?

Accurately predicting how long a task will take is usually the most difficult part of time management. Most of us are not very accurate timekeepers, especially when we are busy applying ourselves to a task. Our estimations must also account for unknowns, as well as interruptions or unforeseen problems that cause delays.

Even when it comes to estimating time on task for something as common as reading, you must acknowledge that different types of content require different lengths of time to read. Fiction, for example, is usually considered a “faster read” than a technical manual. But you might not agree if the fiction is older or uses a different style of language.

Important elements of estimating time include the following:

- Understanding the requirements of each assignment or task
- Knowing all the materials, data, information, and resources you may need
- Awareness of research time, waiting time, and response time
- Ensuring that you know the order or dependencies of steps
- Recognizing any interim due dates (such as a first draft)

Consider the table below, which estimates average time for common academic activities.

| Activity | Unit | Time on Task | Notes |
|--|--------------|---------------|---|
| General academic reading (textbook, professional journals) | 1 page | 5–7 minutes | Be aware that your personal reading speed may differ and may change over time. |
| Technical reading (math, charts and data) | 1 page | 10–15 minutes | Be aware that your personal reading speed may differ and may change over time. |
| Short-answer Quiz or homework question, oriented toward recall or identification type answers | Per Question | 1–2 minutes | Complexity of questions will greatly influence the time required. |
| Short-answer Quiz or homework question, oriented toward application, evaluation, or synthesis of knowledge | Per question | 2–3 minutes | Complexity of questions will greatly influence the time required. |
| Math problem sets, complex | Per question | 15 minutes | For example: algebra, complex equations, financial calculations |
| Writing: short, no research | Per page | 60 minutes | Includes drafting, writing, proofing, and finalizing |
| Writing: research paper | Per page | 105 minutes | Includes research time, drafting, editing, proofing, and finalizing (built into per-page calculation) |
| Study for quiz | Per chapter | 60 minutes | 45–90 minutes per chapter, depending upon complexity of material |
| Study for exam | Per exam | 90 minutes | 1–2 hours, depending upon complexity of material |

Again, these are averages, and it does not mean anything if your times are a little slower or a little faster. There is no “right amount of time,” only the time that it takes you to do something so you can accurately plan and manage your time.



How to Prioritize

Prioritization means putting some tasks and activities ahead of others. While prioritization should involve a degree of flexibility, you should try to stick to your priorities as much as possible. It can be all too easy to immediately respond to an issue as soon as it comes to mind, especially if it is causing stress. But you should consider the impact on your overall goals and priorities. When it comes to juggling multiple problems or tasks to complete, prioritizing them first may mean the difference between completing everything satisfactorily and completing nothing at all.

Make Certain You Understand the Requirements of Each Task

One of the best ways to make good decisions about the prioritization of tasks is to understand the requirements of each. If you have multiple assignments to complete and you assume one of those assignments will only take an hour, you may decide to put it off until the others are finished. Your assumption could be disastrous if you find, once you begin the assignment, that there are several extra components that you did not account for and the time to complete will be four times as long as you estimated. Or, one of the assignments may be dependent on the results of another—like performing in a lab and then writing a report on the results. If you are not aware that one assignment depends upon the completion of the other before you begin, you could inadvertently do the assignments out of order and have to start over. Because of situations like this, it is critically important to understand exactly what needs to be done to complete a task before you determine its priority.

Always undertake the following steps:

- Read the assignment fully and/or take detailed notes when the instructor describes it.
- Ask questions; don't assume you know
- If there is any opportunity for an instructor, tutor, assistant, or other *knowledgeable* person to review your progress, take it; this not only helps with time management, but probably helps your grade.
- If you need lab time, research time, device time, or a response from others, build that time into your planning process.

Studying Tips from UNC Learning Center:

<https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/studying-101-study-smarter-not-harder/>

1

Increase Personal Responsibility — Adopt the mindset that *you* are the only person responsible for your goals. Hindrances and roadblocks may appear along the way, but you are responsible for navigating around them and overcoming them. Take control of the journey! Issues are not other people's problems. They are for you to solve.

2

Reward Yourself for Completing the Task — We are all motivated by rewards. Use this to your advantage and give yourself rewards for a job well done.

3

Make Certain They are *Your* Goals — Again, your motivation level is not as high if the end result is not something you want to achieve.

4

Visualize the Results — Keeping in mind the benefits and visualizing the end results of each goal is extremely effective in keeping motivated.

5

Break the Goal Down into Manageable Tasks — As with any task, accomplishing the whole is easier when each part is tackled individually.

6

Tap Into Other People's Energy — Surround yourself with other people that are motivated. As humans, we are social creatures, which means our moods and emotions can be influenced by others. If you are around other positive people that all work toward achieving their own goals, their energy can become infectious.

7

Remind Yourself why You Set the Goal — This last item is of the utmost importance, especially for long term goals. Sometimes it is too easy to become mired in the drudgery of a difficult task and forget why you are doing something in the first place. Reminding yourself of the end goal helps reinforce everything you do that works toward your goal.



Managing Procrastination

Simply put, procrastination is the act of delaying some task that needs to be completed. It is something we all do to greater and lesser degrees. For most people, minor procrastination is not a cause for great concern. But there are situations where procrastination can become a serious problem with a lot of risk: when it becomes a chronic habit, when there are a number of tasks to complete and little time, or when the task being avoided is very important.

Get Organized

The most effective way to combat procrastination is to use management strategies such as schedules, goal setting, and other techniques to accomplish tasks in a timely manner.

Put Aside Distractions

Distractions are the primary way people procrastinate. It is too easy to just play a video game a little while longer, check out social media, or finish watching a movie when we are avoiding a task. Putting aside distractions is one of the primary functions of setting priorities.

Reward Yourself

Rewarding yourself for the completion of tasks or meeting goals is a good way to avoid procrastination. An example of this would be rewarding yourself with the time to watch a movie you would enjoy *after* you have finished the things you need to do, rather than using the movie to keep yourself from getting things done.

Be Accountable—Tell Someone Else

A strong motivational tool is to hold ourselves accountable by telling someone else we are going to do something and when we are going to do it. This may not seem like it would be very effective, but on a psychological level we feel more compelled to do something if we tell someone else. It may be related to our need for approval from others, or it might just serve to set a level of commitment.

ProTip: Procrastination Awareness and Avoidance

The learning center at University of North Carolina provides more resources for overcoming procrastination. <https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/how-to-tame-procrastination/>



Time and Priority Management Methods

Calendars, Lists, and Reminders

As much as possible, try to unify and organize your calendars and task lists as much as possible. You can choose any number of online tools for this, including a built-in calendar app on your phone. Whichever you pick, try to make your settings work so that as much information flows there as possible. Follow a discipline of adding tasks, meetings, and other notes to your calendar.

For example, if most of your activities are coming through your campus learning management system calendar, then maybe it's best to simply use that calendar for everything. Most of your classwork could be represented there, and you could manually add club meetings, work hours, family events, and so on.

On the other hand, you might want to use a more generic system like Google Calendar. If so, again, try to input all your items there.

ProTip: Trial (version) and Error

If you haven't yet settled on a planner or calendar, don't immediately purchase an expensive one or subscribe to a paid app. You can print out free sample pages from different types of planners, or find an app that offers a trial period or is free. Note that many people and companies use the free Google calendar, which also interfaces with other applications.

Eisenhower Matrix (aka 2-by-2)

To better see how things may need to be prioritized, some people make a list of the tasks they need to complete and then arrange them in a quadrant map based on importance and urgency. Traditionally, this is called the Eisenhower Decision Matrix (named after the World War II Allied Commander and later President of the United States). Sometimes it's called the Urgent-Important Matrix, or even just the "2-by-2."

With this method, you begin by considering the urgency and importance of each item you need to do. Urgency refers to when you need to get it done, and importance refers to how necessary or critical it is to complete.

Below are some examples of how you might consider assignments for school:

- Urgent: Something due in the next couple of days.
- Not Urgent: Something due in a couple of weeks.
- Important: Something worth a very large portion of your grade.
- Not important: Something optional or extra credit.

Note that you should be as honest with yourself as possible on the urgency and importance of these elements. Remember that sometimes we seek to avoid uncomfortable or tedious tasks.

When you arrange the items, you'll see which you should work on first -- the urgent-important box. The others you should prioritize in order of when they are due. The figure below shows an example with some common activities included.

| | Urgent | Not Urgent |
|---------------|---|--|
| Important | Urgent and Important <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paper due tomorrow• Apply for internship by deadline | Not Urgent but Important <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exam next week• Flu shot |
| Not Important | Urgent but Not Important <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Amazon sale• Laundry | Not Urgent and Not Important <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Check social• TV show |