

Time Management

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Good time management is essential to success at university. Planning your time allows you to spread your work over a session, avoid a 'traffic jam' of work, and cope with study stress.

Studying at uni often involves meeting conflicting deadlines, and unless you plan ahead, you'll find it impossible to manage. To meet the demands of study you need to spread your workload over a session. Work out what needs to be done and when. Work out how to use your available time as efficiently as possible.



Plan Ahead and Prioritise

The first step to good time management is to prioritise your tasks. In other words, deciding which task is most important and should be completed first. For example, in a choice between reading for an essay due in *four* weeks or preparing a seminar presentation in *two* weeks, choose to prepare the presentation.

To prioritise successfully you must develop weekly and long term time management plans. Many students find long, medium and short term planning useful for organising their study. Planning ahead saves time, stress and energy.

Long-Term Planning

Using a Yearly Planner

A yearly planner you can place on your wall or by your desk allows you to plan your workload over an entire session and helps to remind you about deadlines and upcoming commitments.

- Place the planner in a position where you have easy access to it.
- Write in the dates assignments are due and exams are scheduled.
- Work out how long you will need to complete each task. Allow yourself plenty of time.
- Remember to allow for extra workload. If you have several assignments due at the same time, then you'll need to begin each task earlier.
- Set start dates for each task and write them on your planner.
- Draw lines back from the due dates to 'start' dates. Use different colour pens for different subjects, assignments or exams. Doing this will give you a good indication of how much time you have to complete tasks and cue you to start them.

Tips to Make Time Management Easier

- Don't put off small tasks. Completing them straight away encourages you to begin tackling larger tasks.
- Try 'chunking' all long/ difficult tasks into sections. This allows you to approach a large task as a series of manageable parts.
- Don't try to write an entire assignment in one sitting. Complete it section by section.
- If you have writer's block, try writing something—anything—down. Even if you change it later, at least you've started.

Your study and the time you spend on it is up to you. If you find yourself losing direction, remind yourself of why you are doing your degree; remembering your goals can put things into perspective.



Planning on a Weekly Basis

Use Time Slots Wisely

Students often believe they have no time to study, but many of them think of study time in terms of long time slots (three hours or more). While long time slots are necessary, medium and short time slots can be used just as effectively. A well-used 15 minutes is more effective than a wasted 2 hours. Different periods of time suit different activities. For example:

| Short Time Slots | Medium Time Slots | Long Time Slots |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| One hour or less is useful for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reviewing lecture notes • completing short readings • previewing long readings • doing problems • revising for exams • jotting down essay plans • proofreading an assignment | One to three hours is a good time for more concentrated study. Medium slots can be used for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more detailed note-reviewing • reading for courses/ assignments • taking notes from readings • drafting/editing an assignment • revising for exams | More than three hours can be set aside for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working on an assignment • completing an extensive amount of reading • doing research for assignments • revising for exams |
| <i>Bus and train journeys or lunch breaks are useful for this kind of work.</i> | <i>During medium and long time slots, divide study time up into one hour sections and take breaks. Try not to study for longer than an hour at a time, as concentration begins to slip.</i> | |

Fill in a Weekly Planner

For weekly planning, use a diary, a timetable or a Learning Centre Weekly Study Schedule.

Fill in all the main demands on your time:

- Uni lectures and tutorials.
- Hours of work (if you have a part-time job).
- Any regular sport or leisure commitments.
- Mealtimes and regular family commitments.
- Sleep times.

When you have blocked in the main demands on your time, look at the blank time slots left. This will help you work out how many hours a week you actually have for study.

Next, plan time slots to use for uni-related work. Fill in times that could be used as study periods including short, medium and long time slots.

| Time | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
|----------|----------|---------|------------|----------|--------|---------------------|--------|
| 6-7 am | | GYM | SHORT | SHORT | SHORT | SHORT | Sleep |
| 7-8 am | SHORT | | Tutorial | Lecture | | | Sleep |
| 8-9 am | Lecture | SHORT | | | GYM | Work | Sleep |
| 9-10 am | | Lab | | | | | Sleep |
| 10-11 am | | | | | | | |
| 11-12 pm | | | MEDIUM | LUNCH | | | |
| 12-1 pm | SHORT | | | Lab | | | |
| 1-2 pm | LUNCH | LUNCH | LUNCH | | LONG | | |
| 2-3 pm | SHORT | | Discussion | | | | LONG |
| 3-4 pm | Tutorial | MEDIUM | Group | | | MEDIUM | |
| 4-5 pm | | | | | | | |
| 5-6 pm | | Lecture | MEDIUM | DINNER | DINNER | Party!!! | |
| 6-7 pm | GYM | | LONG | Work | Work | Let My Hair Down!!! | |
| 7-8 pm | SHORT | | DINNER | | | | DINNER |
| 8-9 pm | DINNER | | MEDIUM | | | | |
| 9-10 pm | Sleep | Dinner | LONG | | | | |
| 10-11 pm | | Sleep | | | | | |
| 11-12 pm | | | Sleep | | | | Sleep |

Be Flexible

Some weeks will be busier than others, and unforeseen things can happen. Remember that a timetable is only a plan or a guide. You don't have to follow it religiously every week, but try to stick to your plan as best you can. If you plan a study time slot and miss it, don't panic—look at the schedule and rearrange your time.

Be Realistic

A great deal of time management is really about taking responsibility for your learning. The best plan is to be aware of how much time you have and to manage it effectively. Be realistic about your time and what you can do with it.

Over commitment

Before you undertake study, you need to realistically assess all the demands on your time. Consider paid employment, family duties, sport, leisure or civic commitments. Good time management will not help if you are overcommitted. If you study full time, spend more than about 12 hours per week in paid employment and spend every evening at the gym, you won't have much time to study. If you suspect you might have taken on too much, reassess your commitments, prioritise and compromise.

Be realistic about the amount of time an assignment will take you to complete. Different tasks require different amounts of preparation time. For example, you might only need a few hours to prepare for a tutorial, but writing an assignment will take significantly longer. You can't produce good, well-written work unless you give yourself enough time to think, research and write. Brilliant assignments are not written the night before, so start them in good time.

Seeking Help

It's easy to procrastinate when you experience difficulties with an assignment, but putting off starting only means you'll have less time to work on it. If you miss an assignment deadline, you will lose marks. So, if you think you need some assistance, ask for it. Remember, good time management includes good self-management. Talk to your tutor about difficult assignments, or visit services like The Learning Centre or The Counselling service. Don't put off seeking advice—the longer you wait, the more anxious you'll feel.

Common Time 'Thieves'

Problem: Feeling so overwhelmed and anxious about your workload that you 'freeze', put things off and don't get anything done.

Solution:

1. Set priorities.
2. Get started.

Actually starting a task reduces your anxiety about it. List all the tasks you have to do in order of importance and urgency, and work through them one at a time. For example, if an assignment is due in one week, then it goes to the top of your 'to do' list.

Problem: Putting off starting a task because it feels so overwhelming or difficult that you can't face it.

Solution: Break up the workload into small chunks.

This is a very effective strategy. Divide work into as many small, achievable tasks as you can. Then when you sit down to study, you are not facing a huge, daunting pile of work, but one small task.

Complete a 'chunk' every study period. It might be a task or a period of revision. Take a break after completing a 'chunk'. If it's something you've really been dreading, reward yourself when you've done it!

Problem: Procrastination (or spending time on irrelevant tasks when you know you should be studying)

Solution: Set study goals and vary your study techniques.

If you're feeling stressed about a task, putting it off will only make things worse. Make a start, even if it's simply to note down a plan about how you will proceed further.

Break up the task into 'chunks' and list each one from start to finish. Set yourself a goal and tackle one chunk at a time.

Be conscious of what you're doing. If you catch yourself delaying study in order to perform some 'essential' task—stop yourself and do it later.

Problem: Daydreaming or ‘drifting off’

Solution: Check your energy level and concentration.

Take a short break or a little exercise every hour. Open a window and walk around. If you drift off, try visualising a red stop light. Hold that image for a few seconds—then switch to a green light and go back to work.

Problem: Feeling that you can’t begin because you won’t be able to produce a ‘perfect’ assignment

Solution:

Forget about writing a masterpiece—aim for reasonable results. It’s better to produce a reasonable effort and pass, than to delay for so long that you produce nothing.

Student Strategies

Some of the following comments from university students at the end of their first year discuss issues of study and time that might sound familiar (Field, Gilchrist & Gray, 1989). The comments are about two areas: planning ahead without getting obsessed about it, and developing effective habits for dealing with worry and stress.

Trying to plan ahead without going overboard:

“Compared to school, it’s not that the work is harder, it’s just that it’s more detailed and therefore more time-consuming“

“Instead of procrastinating, start thinking about the assignment right away so that you’re the first one to get to the books. Most importantly, if you get a good start on an assignment you allow yourself enough time to deal with any unexpected problems”

Developing effective habits for dealing with worry and stress:

“Having some fun or relaxation on the weekend gives me enough strength to regain my sanity to start another week”

“Even though I’m not finding everything awful or the workload too great, I get anxious sometimes. Last week, for example, I was sick and didn’t get half as much done as I had planned. So I have more to do this week. I’m finding right now that I can’t get all my reading done. So I just have to read what is most important, as I know I can’t possibly read every single thing”



Further Readings

Covey, S 1990, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Simon & Shuster, New York.

Field, D, Gilchrist, G & Gray, N 1989, *First Year University: A Survival Guide*. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

MacQueen, C 1998, *Getting Ahead in Tertiary Study: A Practical Guide for Business, Social Science and Arts Students*, UNSW Press, Sydney.

Northedge, A 1990, *The Good Study Guide*, The Open University, Milton Keynes.

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