

Time Management for Students

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You need to manage time effectively if you're going to be successful. All other things being held constant, better time management skills can improve your grades, help you keep stress in check, and help you be competitive in the career you undertake following your university education (Gortner, Lahmers, and Zulaut, 2000; Macan et. al., 1990; ISR, 1995). The purpose of this document is to teach you how to manage your time to improve your academic and personal performance. It refers to research on academic self-regulation research and discusses time management strategies to help you adjust how you think about time, improve your awareness of how you use time, and make change for peak performance.

The Time Management Cycle

Time management “systems” often fail because they are born of perfectionism and unrealistic expectations. For instance, some people don't initiate a time management approach until they're already falling behind in their work; they undertake time management as a means of catching up. Their initial plans tend to cram in everything they have to do without appropriate regard for the time required. The unrealistic plans that emerge from “catch-up time management” amount to little more than an expression of renewed motivation for change but without the structure to support it. Those trying to follow crammed schedules often fall seriously behind their intended pace and abandon the plan altogether, resulting in continued time trouble. Some conclude somehow that these strategies of planning don't work for them. But, what is important isn't being perfect, it is making and using a plan that helps you accomplish your goals.



One of your best options for time management systems is to begin using a cyclical system early in the academic year. Usually the system begins with the process of goal setting to establish a context for managing time. The next phase of the system involves tracking time and developing an awareness for where you spend your time. The third phase of the cycle is plan making, and this could include making to-do lists, weekly plans, monthly plans and longer-range plans. The fourth phase of the system is self-monitoring your action. Self monitoring involves paying attention to how well you are working your plan, how accurately you have planned, how well you have forecasted for various events and so on. The ideas for self-monitoring come from important research on student academic self-regulation which emphasizes the importance of adaptation in student success (see Zimmerman, 1998; Butler, 1998, and Boekarts, 1995). The final phase of the cycle is time shifting and adjusting (i.e., changing where you spend your

time to better match your intended use of time) in which you make corrections to the system before starting the cycle again at goal setting. Taken together, these phases permit you to initialize a process of gradual, performance-based improvement in time management skill. Everybody wants the “quick fix”, but the complexity of changes involved in really getting a grip on your time management process will take some time to move through. Resist the urge to cast aside strategies that don’t promise instant results; like it or not, change takes time.

Goal Setting

What are your goals? Really, what are your goals? It might help to divide your goals into time frames (immediate goals, short-mid-term goals, long-range goals) but you don’t absolutely have to do so for the exercise to be useful. And, you don’t have to have firm answers to those gripping questions about what you want to be or do when you’re done at university to make this work; your goals are likely to shift and change over time anyway. All you need to do right now is think of a handful of goals to get started. Write down a list of goals now before reading further.

Take a look at your list of goals. How many of the tasks you intend to do today contribute to accomplishing the goals you have set for yourself? Are you actively working on these goals? Are you putting any of them off for a later time? What would you have to change in your life to make it possible to work on these goals?

Sub-dividing Goals into manageable pieces

Once you have a set of goals, it is useful to decompose the goals into manageable steps or sub-goals. Decomposing your goals makes it possible to tackle them one small step at a time and to reduce procrastination. Consider for instance the goal of obtaining your degree. This goal can be broken down into four sub-goals. Each sub-goal is the successful completion of one year of your program. These sub-goals can be further broken down into individual courses within each year. The courses can be broken down into tests, exams, term papers and such within the course, or into the 13 weeks of classes in each term. Each week can be further subdivided into days, and each day can be thought of in terms of the hours and minutes you’ll spend in your classes and doing homework for today. While it may seem challenging to take in the whole scope of that convergent goal, thinking of your goals in this way helps to reinforce the idea that there is a connected path linking what actions you take today and the successful completion of your goals. Seeing these connections can help you monitor your own progress and detect whether you are on track or not. Take some time now to think through the goals you’ve set and to break them down into their smaller constituent parts.

Time Awareness and Time Tracking

It will help you manage your time well if you know where your time actually gets spent. One very helpful way of determining your actual usage of time is to track your time. The process here is like making a schedule, but it works in reverse. Instead of writing things in that you are planning to do, time logging is a process of writing down the things that you have already done. Doing this is sort of a get-to-know-yourself exercise because this procedure will highlight many of your habits that you might selectively ignore currently.

For instance, some people find that every time they plan to do math homework they end up watching television. Other people just can't seem to follow their schedule until the week before finals. Whatever your time habits, time tracking will help you adjust and fine-tune your time management practices. Having accurate information about your time usage patterns can serve as another important point of reference for self-monitoring. A few ways to track your time follow:

Strategy #1: Time Tracking is fairly straightforward. At the end of every hour jot yourself a quick note about how you actually spent your time for that hour. The note needn't be long; one sentence or less should suffice. If how you spent your time doesn't match an already planned activity, simply enter a comment as to what you really did during that time. This way you will be able to review patterns that emerge in your use of time and make adjustments to improve your productivity.

Strategy #2: Some people find it helpful to modify the planning page to facilitate tracking time. The modifications are easy enough: make two columns on your paper for each day of the week. In one column, write down the plan you are trying to follow; in the second column, make notes on what you actually did with your time. The side-by-side comparison is very telling and an excellent way to figure out where you're not using time in the way you intend.

Strategy #3: Another effective way to make changes and get results from your time management strategies is to summarize your time use by time category such as: sleep, study, work, travel and so on. Before doing the summary, estimate the amount of time that you think you spend on the various activities listed on the form below and enter these in the "expected" row of the summary sheet. Feel free to add any additional categories that might be helpful. Then log your time for one week on an hour by hour basis. When the week is over summarize your time by category for each day, add up the values for all seven days of the week, and write the totals in the "actual" row of the summary sheet.

Summarizing your time use allows you to understand how much time you really spend in the various areas of your life. Take a look at the example form to the right; it is a sample that we have used in many workshops with students. It is almost certain that you will see a notable difference between the number of hours you expected to use in certain categories and the actual number of hours you

Weekly Summary of Time Use								
	Sleep	Eating	Commute	Family/ Social	Study	Work	T.V.	Other
Monday								
Tuesday								
Wednesday								
Thursday								
Friday								
Saturday								
Sunday								
Expected								
Actual								
Difference								

spend. If you find that you spend more time in one area than you wanted, and less in another, the weekly summary of time use clearly indicates which activities to reduce to find the extra time you want for that neglected area of your life.

However you choose to understand the differences between your expected use of time and your actual use of time, your focus should be on trying to detect and adjust patterns in your own real use of time that spell trouble for you reaching your goals. (For those of you freaked out by knowing exactly where you spend your time because it only seems to reinforce your sense of time pressure, read chapter 15 of Ralph Keyes' book *Timelock: How life got so hectic and what you can do about it.*)

Here's something to think about: Various published resources and informal studies report that, in Canada and the United States, fully half of the 168 hours available in a week (that is, on average 84 of those hours) are used up for the "basics", including sleeping, eating, washing and beautifying, and commuting from home to school and to work. (Robinson and Godbey, 1997) How do your own numbers compare? How will you spend the remaining 84 hours per week?

Planning

You have probably used various kinds of planning tools before, including a daily or weekly planner, a month-at-a-glance planner, and so on. In this section, we introduce four planning tools and the thinking strategies that go along with each one: a Monthly Planner, a Weekly Objectives List, a Weekly Planner and a Time Log. It is important to keep in mind that the purpose of scheduling is not to enslave you to your planner, but rather to record your decisions about when certain things should happen.

The Monthly Planner

The monthly planner can be used as a time-bound memory aid, tracking major deadlines and exam dates, appointments, important anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, vacations and so on. But, you can get more out of the monthly planner if you use it to record interim deadlines and forecast upcoming busy periods as final deadlines approach. A properly completed monthly planner will indicate upcoming busy periods, show whether there is room in the plan for new tasks, and help you assess whether you are on target to achieve your goals. Let's say for example that you had an upcoming exam in your Introductory Microeconomics class. Start by entering the date of the exam so you don't forget it. Next, think of the tasks that comprise the goal of doing well in the exam, think about how long each step of the task should take, and enter a series of interim deadlines for each step between the start of your preparation for the exam and the exam date itself. Use these interim deadlines as milestones to indicate the progress of your study. (If you're prone to breaking your own interim deadlines, it can help to reinforce these by making appointments with a peer, an instructor, or a teaching assistant.)

The Weekly Planner

Take a look at your weekly planner. What do you have written in it? Likely, you list lecture times, tutorial times, laboratory times, times for extracurricular activities, and various other appointments. If this sounds like your schedule then you are probably under-using another very versatile time management tool because many of the most important tasks (homework activities which move you toward your goals) are left out of the picture. The implication of this should be clear: *If it isn't on the schedule it won't get done.*

Stepping from the weekly objectives list to the weekly planner is easy. Using the time estimates for the activities on the weekly objectives list as guides find a block of time of appropriate duration in your schedule. Then write in the activities one at a time in priority order until you have either scheduled all of your activities or you have run out of time spaces. A good idea here, if it seems you'll run out of time spaces, is to start scheduling the most important activities first. For instance, consider the following activity: "Complete readings and review notes." This activity might take 3 hours and could be placed almost anywhere in the week where you have time and where you'll likely be able to work. You might schedule three one-hour blocks, two 90 minute blocks or one three-hour block, depending on your preferences. The key here is to associate the specific task to specific times, avoiding making a schedule where the tasks are too closely scheduled or where important activities are assigned to unrealistic work times.

Construct a plan for each week, following the rhythm of your courses that meet weekly. To help make planning a routine activity, pick a regular day each week to schedule. Even with unexpected occurrences that can impact your schedule you assist yourself in making decisions that are governed by your desire to reach your goals. Without using a schedule you may be governed by your moment-to-moment moods which may lead you to make time decisions that take you away from your goals. Once your week is planned you will experience clarity of focus, your tendency to be distracted will be reduced and you will be certain of your reasons for doing the things you had planned. Committing yourself to a plan you've made represents a renewal of your motivation for the goals and tends to increase your time on task.

How much time is enough?

The time you spend on task has some relationship to the quality of work you end up producing. A good gauge to follow is to perform 2-3 hours of school work outside class for every hour of class time. Yes, this means for a full-time student with a 15 hour of class per week load the recommendation is to do between 30 and 45 hours of homework each week. Yes, that's a big jump, especially if you breezed through high school or previous years of university or less. This estimate simply reflects the time it actually takes to learn effectively at university (ISR, 1995a; ISR, 1995b). But this number shouldn't mean that you completely forego time for yourself. It is important to have some personal time. Even though you may work a part-time job (and doing so isn't necessarily counter-productive to success at school (ISR, 1995d)), you'll need to take some time for yourself and for recreation each week. A starting guideline might be something like 10% of your week, or 17 hours. What is more important than these specific targets is that you

spend enough time on school work to ensure that you're successful and that you spend enough time outside of school to ensure that you have a healthy balance in your life. Keep in mind that using a planner in the way we're describing is a learned skill that will take time and patience to master. Keep your focus not on making the perfect plan or on executing every plan flawlessly, but on learning from your good and bad experiences and using this knowledge to improve subsequent plans.

Taking Action

Once you have set your goals, figured out where your time is currently spent and decided on a plan that will help you to reach your goals, the next step is to take action. Now you must do the tasks that converge on your goals. By producing a plan, you have written down your decisions about how to spend your time so that you don't have to get stuck deciding whether to do tasks that have nothing to do with your goals. As you begin working on the tasks, keep your focus on doing the best you can to execute what you have set out for yourself. Stay very clear on the fact that the plan is an ideal and that in action you will not execute it perfectly. Some things will take longer than you planned. Some new tasks will emerge. There will be enticing distractions that may take your attention away from your work, but you can diminish the impact of distractions if you remember that the tasks listed on your plan lead you to goals you have chosen for yourself. The main thing is to do the very best you can to follow the plan and monitor your progress so that you can learn from your good and bad experiences along the way.

Time Shifting and Adjusting

Inevitably, you will need to make adjustments to your plans and your time management habits. As you encounter time troubles, keep in mind that some are predictable, some are not; some are controllable, some are not. For those that are not controllable, keep your cool and get back on track as soon as possible. For time troubles that you can control, and particularly those that occur predictably, deal with them directly and forcefully so that they don't prevent you from achieving your goals. Examine the following list of troubles: the tips and strategies associated with each one can help you shift your time back to your goals.

Procrastination

You're not alone. According to O'Brien (2002) up to 40% of university students experience procrastination as a problem. Also, Taraban et. al. (1999) reported that students tended to mass their practice (that is, do most of the work in marathon sessions) near academic deadlines and failed to make appropriate use of various study aids and supports at appropriate times (i.e., earlier in the term). But why do you procrastinate on tasks related to goals you want to achieve? Burka and Yuen (1983) argue that procrastination often emerges as a means of distancing oneself from stressful activities. For instance, Son and Metcalf (2000) report people allocate more time to the judged-easy task than to judged-difficult tasks. Burka and Yuen (1983) indicate that dealing with the underlying stressful aspects of the activities can assist in reducing the extent of procrastination. Here's one practical application. If you're overwhelmed by the volume

of work on your to-do list, you might benefit from making a “one-item list”: re-write the top item from your list at the top of a blank page and work the task to completion, then repeat.

Getting Started

It can be difficult to start working. Most of the time, however, not starting seems to be related to fear of poor results or negative evaluations than it is to the actual difficulty of the work. Aim to subdivide tasks into small steps and convince yourself that to get started all you need is 10 full minutes working on a task. Often, the 10 minutes will elapse and you'll be right into the swing of things, prepared to continue on productively.

Motivation

Sometimes you just don't feel motivated to do your school work. It might help to realize that for many people motivation isn't a prerequisite to action...it is a result of it! Try working for a short time and see if you can “get into it.” If your motivation problem seems more substantial, it might help to realize that when you aren't motivated to do school work, you aren't actually out of motivation...you're just motivated to do something else.

Line-ups

You'll spend a lot of your time waiting in lines. At the library check-out, waiting for the bus, waiting for the light to turn green at an intersection, buying tickets, and even waiting for the professor to arrive at class... you find yourself just waiting. If you carried around a book or some photocopied readings you could be actively using time that would otherwise escape you. Tape cassettes of your lectures are ideal ways to fill times like these, and the review will profoundly aid your recall come exam time.

Commuting

North Americans spend between 1 and 2 hours commuting from home to work or school every day. If you commute, you will probably find 5 to 10 hours of your week taken up in a car, bus or subway. In one year, your commute works out to between 250 and 500 hours; over the course of 4 or 5 years, your commuting time equates to attending all of the required lectures in every course of a 4-year university degree. The challenge is to use that time for something productive. One common example is to read on the bus or subway. Even 5 minutes and a couple of pages work out to hours and books. If you happen to be driving, don't read - that's dangerous. But, study anyway. Tape your professor's lecture or yourself reading. You will be amazed at how much you can learn in these small blocks of time. The key to commuting time is, simply, use it or lose it.

Between Classes

Take a look at your lecture schedule. Do you have a couple 1-hour or 2-hour blocks of time between classes? What are you doing with that time? Don't excuse wasted time with the worn out justification that you had only one or two hours and couldn't really get into anything. Do something useful with the time. To make the most of the time between classes, find a spot on campus where you can work comfortably and without interruption. And remember, not every minute of time needs to go to school work..

Conclusion: Repeating the Time Management Cycle

We began this article by introducing the idea of the time management cycle. Accordingly, we end this article where we began by reminding you that the time management cycle is meant to be an iterative process. As you go through the cycle multiple times, you'll find that your goals solidify, your awareness of your time use sharpens, and your ability to make a workable plan improves. As you take action on your plans in successive cycles of time management, you will gain academic confidence from knowing that you are progressing towards your goals. As you face the day to day realities of student life, you will need to remain flexible and willing to learn from your experiences and to adjust your plans as they unfold. Remember that the goal is always to build on what you have learned from before. Time management is not only a school skill; indeed, time management and self-management are life skills that will figure largely in your future success. Good luck and best wishes.

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