

Managing time and tasks

Essential skills for successful study

Successfully managing all of your priorities and commitments requires an organised approach to both time and task management.

Many students begin university with already busy lives; they have other important commitments or priorities in addition to study.

Think about how many commitments and tasks you have to juggle and prioritise on any given day, in any given week. If you have a part-time or full-time job, you need to factor in the hours you work with your university schedule. Your social life also requires time, and there is also the time taken to travel between home, university and other places.

At university there are many commitments and deadlines relating to, for example, enrolment; managing fees or other finances; your timetable of classes; due dates for assignments; and exam dates and times. This is in addition to work requirements or leisure activities that make demands on your time too.

To be successful, you have to organise yourself.

What's your current approach?

Take some time to think about how you ordinarily manage time in your everyday life, as this is an important clue to the sort of time management issues you may be facing.

Ask yourself:

- Are you the sort of person who likes routine?
- Are you always on time?
- Do you like organising your time and writing up 'to do' lists?
- Are you able to prioritise tasks without any difficulty?
- Are you the kind of person who leaves things to the last minute or someone who spaces out tasks sequentially?
- Do deadlines feel oppressive to you or are they a challenge?
- Do you tend to procrastinate rather than take action? Do you put things off?

Look at the scenario in the box in the next column.

Q: You have an important exam next month. When do you start looking at your notes to revise?

(Beware! Your answer will reveal your true self)

1. One month before and have your notes categorised and organised
2. A week before
3. A couple of days before
4. The night before

To make a realistic appraisal of your use of time and then to develop an effective approach to time and task management, you need to understand the implications of your answer. For example, those who revise at the last minute may have been thinking about revision but just not been organised enough to do it. They need to re-organise how they approach time and tasks.

It can be really helpful to ask others how they manage their time – not so that you can copy them, but so that you begin to recognise that managing time is personal. That said, there are a number of tried and tested ways to get organised and successfully manage both time and tasks.

Getting into it

Think about your **priorities**, the things that you **have to** do and the things you like to do and consider what is flexible and what is not. Write a list of all the activities you are currently involved in. Consider the things that take up most time and the things that you are perhaps not getting done.

Often, the worst part about having a lot to do is not the work itself but the worry associated with it. You need to find your own way of keeping track of what you have to do.

If you have to battle procrastination, it may be that you have not worked out a way of managing a task. Procrastination can be your mind's way of saying "I don't know how to start". It may not be laziness – it might be more about **prioritising**. Frequently, procrastinators can be very busy doing other things instead of the thing they should be doing.

Get into it; don't wait for the 'right time' to start work. Anything that you do toward completing a task helps you to finish it. Sometimes taking half an hour whenever you can may be the turning point to finishing.

A time management approach

Many students assume that study is about knowledge and subject content, but in fact the way to be a successful student is to know *what* to do with the information presented to you.

The essential element to managing time is to always know what you have to do, and to have a plan for when and how you are going to get it done.

Develop the list habit – make it something visual

Use visual reminders: your diary, calendar in your phone, use a wall calendar, annotate a copy of your course outline with tasks and dates due, put a whiteboard in your room – any method or combination that works for you – and keep daily ‘to do’ lists. Cross things off when you get them done; keep it up to date.

Organise your timetable – use a planning device

1. Make sure you have your **Student diary** – it contains all the official university dates you will need to know – and/or have checked the university’s website for ‘key dates’. Note these down (<http://www.unimelb.edu.au/keydates/>).
2. Use a **semester wall planner**; you can buy one at the university bookshop – put it up on the wall in your study area. Collect your course or subject outlines and note down *all* the dates on which assignments and projects are due, and when exams are scheduled.
3. List all timetable commitments – lectures, tutorials, practicals, seminars, etc on your wall planner.
4. Add other fixed commitment, for example: paid work, house duties, sport, and social events.
5. Look for **blocks of time** that can be used for study group meetings, researching in the library, reading and writing up your notes.

(Note that several shorter study sessions are often more productive than longer blocks of time.)

Let other people know your timetable

Managing study tasks has to be achieved in relation to the rest of your life. Fitting everything in means making choices, planning ahead and negotiating with the people in your life.

Sometimes managing time successfully means saying “no” to friends, to family, or to overtime at work: it’s about making priorities

Discuss your study timetable with friends and family, place the timetable on the fridge or give them a copy. This can make them aware of the demands in your life and help them to understand when you can’t go out.

Develop a regular study pattern

Do you work best in the morning, or late at night? Managing study will require you to identify the time for

work that best suits you; if you are a morning person, for example, try to get important tasks done before lunch. Establishing a regular pattern of work can help get you into a routine. This allows you to feel more in control, to fit all tasks required into the time available and to maximise your time use.

A task management approach

An alternative way to think about time management is to stop worrying about how long it takes to do something and focus attention on **what** you are doing: the task. If you manage the task, the time will often manage itself. The stress you feel in relation to time is not time itself but the task that remains undone. Getting on with the task is the best way to manage time.

Divide the task into useful smaller, measurable tasks

When trying to manage time, the easiest way to not do well is to be too general in planning a series of tasks. For example:

Planner: Monday

- 2 pm Physics
- 2.30pm Biology



There is not enough detail here to ensure that you have the relevant material with you or that you have a clear, measurable idea of what you want to achieve.

Compare that approach to this:

Planner: Monday

- Do Physics tute questions; write a 1-page summary of issues
- Borrow 4 books on reading list
- Finish 3 Biology lecture pre-readings



This task-specific measurable approach means that you can be flexible about the order in which you do the tasks, but that you want to finish them on Monday. If Tuesday arrives and these tasks are not completed then they should be added to Tuesday’s list, re-evaluated or removed. This approach also lets you work out how much you want to get done.

Finally

Remember to keep balance in your life. If you have chosen to go out socially instead of studying, do it – don’t waste that time worrying about not studying. Plan to get back to the books the next day.

Further Resources

Deakin University *Time Management*. Retrieved July 11, 2011 from <http://www.deakin.edu.au/current-students/study-support/study-skills/handouts/organising.php>

University of New South Wales. (2010). *Time Management*. Retrieved July 11, 2011 from <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/time.html>

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