

TIME MANAGEMENT

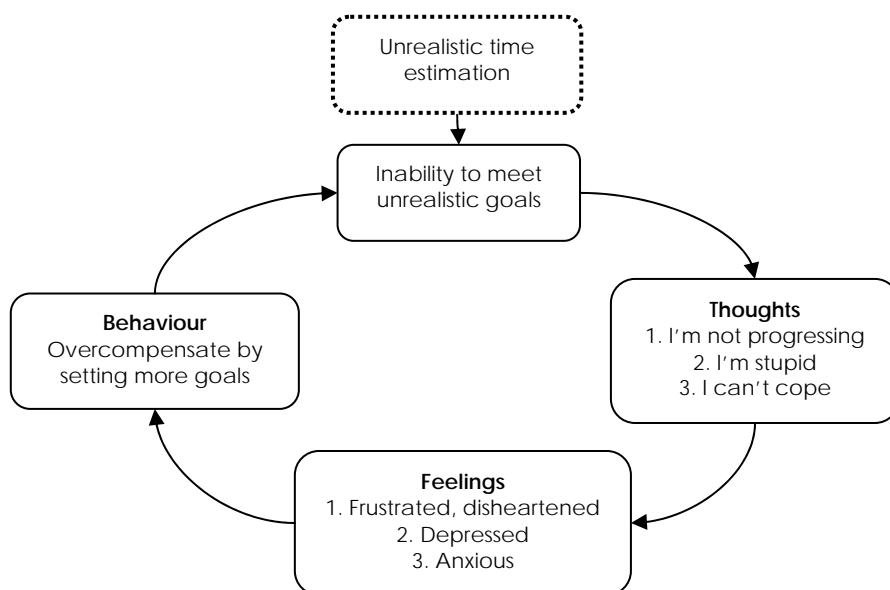
Studying at university is often a balancing act. Your life revolves around juggling classes, studying, paid work, household responsibilities, spending time with friends and families, hobbies or sporting commitments. There are also variations within the academic year – you can reasonably expect that your study commitments will increase from the middle of the semester as you try to manage exams and assignments.



The key to managing these different and variable commitments is to use effective time management skills. Follow the steps in this handout to get on track and stay on track with managing your time. While many of these strategies seem like commonsense, if we all remembered to follow common sense then we would not experience problems with time management. The reality is that we can all get off-track from time to time, and by taking action before things get out of hand we can easily get back on track.

Step 1: Identify how long tasks *actually* take

We often *underestimate* how long a task actually takes. This can range from underestimating how long it takes to complete small, daily tasks such as having a shower, to underestimating how long it takes to complete a major assignment. Quite often, students set themselves the task of reading 3 chapters in one evening, not taking into account that there are 50 pages for each chapter, the chapter is about a very complex topic, and of the one evening there are only two available hours once you exclude preparing dinner, eating, and doing the dishes. Underestimating the time it takes to complete tasks can create the following negative cycle:



How do we stop the negative cycle from perpetuating? You could try one or two of the following suggestions:

1. Obtain a realistic estimation of how long everyday tasks take. Time – rather than just guess – how long it actually takes you to iron a shirt, make a 'quick' phone call, have a shower, prepare dinner, get ready in the morning, go grocery shopping, etc. The amount of time these tasks take up can be quite surprising!
2. Work out where your time is spent. Keep a diary over a period of one week. Every hour, make a note of what you have spent the previous hour doing.
3. For each task that you estimate, you may wish to multiply the estimated time by 1.5 to 2 times. Research shows us that underestimating how long it takes to complete a task is a very common phenomenon.

Step 2: Identify how much time you *really* have

Now that we know how long tasks actually take, let's look at how much time we actually have available to us. The reality is that many students think that the time that they have for studying is what is left over after classes, dinner, and work. For them, their timetable may look like this:

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
6-7 am	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep-in	Sleep-in
7-8 am							
8-9 am	Gym		Gym				
9-10 am	Lectures			Lectures	Lectures & tutorial		
10-11 am							
11-12 am		Lecture	Lecture				
12 pm-1 pm		Lunch	Lunch			Lunch	
1-2 pm	Lunch	Lecture	Lunch	Lunch	Tutorial	Lunch	Lunch
2-3 pm	Lab/ tutorial		Lab/tutorial	Lab	Lecture		
3-4 pm		Lecture					
4-5 pm		Tutorial					
5-6 pm				Work			
6-7 pm		Sport					
7-8 pm	Dinner		Dinner			Dinner	Dinner
8-9 pm		Dinner					
9-10 pm				Dinner			
10-11 pm							
11 pm-12 am				Sleep		Sleep	
12 pm-1 am	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep		Sleep		Sleep

Unfortunately, there is a lot missing from the timetable above, including activities such as socialising, relaxing, household duties, and travelling time are missing from this timetable. These are all activities that take up time. A more realistic version takes into account:

- Commitments: Classes, work, sports, gym, committees, etc. Include travelling time.
- Personal time: Grooming/hygiene, relaxing after returning home from university, watching television, listening to music, shopping, socialising (including emails, phone calls, on-line chatting or gaming), etc.
- Essential time: Showering, eating, and sleeping.
- Housework: Preparing meals, doing dishes, cleaning house, doing laundry, etc.

A more realistic timetable may therefore look something like this, which shows far less available hours than the first timetable:

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	
6-7 am	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep-in	Sleep-in	
7-8 am	Travel	Shower/eat	Travel	Shower/eat	Shower/eat			
8-9 am	Gym	Travel	Gym	Travel	Travel			
9-10 am	Lectures	Internet	Shower/eat	Lectures	Lectures & tutorial	Relaxing & laundry/ housework	Shower	
10-11 am		Socialise						
11-12 am		Lecture	Lecture				Socialising	
12 pm-1 pm		Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Tutorial		Lunch
2-3 pm	Lab/ tutorial	Socialise	Lab/tutorial	Lab	Lecture	Grocery shopping		
3-4 pm		Lecture						
4-5 pm	Travel	Tutorial						
5-6 pm	Shower	Travel	Travel	Work		Cook dinner		
6-7 pm	Relax	Sport	Cook					
7-8 pm	Dinner		Dinner			Dinner	Dinner	
8-9 pm	Dishes/relax	Dinner	Dishes/relax				Dishes/relax	
9-10 pm		Travel		Dinner	Socialising			
10-11 pm		Shower		Relax				
11 pm-12 am	Socialising	Relax	Socialising	Sleep			Sleep	
12 pm-1 am	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep					Sleep

Your turn: Use the blank timetable over the page to gain a realistic estimation of how you spend your time and how much time you have to devote to academic study and then what is left unallocated. Photocopy it as many times you need – maybe even one for each week of the semester.

Week beginning: _____

Semester week: _____

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
6-7 am							
7-8 am							
8-9 am							
9-10 am							
10-11 am							
11 am – 12 pm							
12 pm – 1 pm							
1-2 pm							
2-3 pm							
3-4 pm							
4-5 pm							
5-6 pm							
6-7 pm							
7-8 pm							
8-9 pm							
9-10 pm							
10-11 pm							
11-12 pm							
12 pm – 1 am							

Step 3: Prioritise your tasks

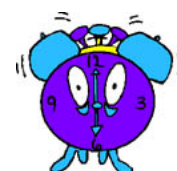
By now, it may seem that fitting everything into your schedule may not be possible. When this occurs, it is important to prioritise. A useful tool to help you prioritise is the Time Management Matrix from Steven Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Time Management Matrix

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	<p>Quadrant 1 (Important/Urgent)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contains tasks that need immediate action as they are deadline-driven (e.g. assignment due tomorrow) Focusing on tasks in Quadrant 1 certainly produces results when you need them Focusing on tasks in Quadrant 1 can lead to stress and burnout because you are constantly managing crises. 	<p>Quadrant 2 (Important/Not Urgent)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contains tasks that are important to your goals and direction but do not require immediate action. In effect, this quadrant focuses on laying the groundwork for future successes. Quadrant 2 tasks can include building working relationships, setting longer term goals, looking after your health so that you are physically and mentally prepared.
NOT IMPORTANT	<p>Quadrant 3 (Not important/Urgent)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contains tasks that are not important, but because there is a time limit to achieving them we view them to be more important than they are. Quadrant 3 tasks include some types of phone calls, some emails, and some assignments. Focusing on tasks in this quadrant can mean that while you complete tasks, you may lack a sense of achievement because these are not integral to your overall goal. 	<p>Quadrant 4 (Not important/Not urgent)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quadrant 4 tasks are those types of tasks that we typically procrastinate with. These include surfing the internet, watching television, and taking unimportant phone calls. Focusing on these tasks distract you from your overall goal and take you away from more pressing tasks.

Focusing on Quadrant 1 tasks helps you attend to urgent and important tasks, but they can also increase stress and contribute to burnout in the longer term. Putting your main focus on Quadrants 3 and 4 means that you spend time on tasks that do not contribute to your longer term goals.

Quadrant 2 is where we are encouraged to spend most of our time. These tasks are aimed at achieving goals *and* sustainability. Tasks that enhance our physical and mental health fall in this quadrant, including making time to exercise, ensuring that you eat a healthy meal, and scheduling time for relaxation to recharge your batteries.



Step 4: Use your time efficiently

The key to using your time efficiently is to know your circadian rhythm and the times at which you are most alert. We commonly identify with labels such as 'morning person' or 'evening person', and there is an element of truth behind these. Research has shown that periods of peak capacity to focus differs between morning and evening types. Our concentration and reaction time varies with our circadian rhythm, whereas our memory and our ability to do calculations are less affected.

What does a circadian rhythm mean for time management? As a university student, even though the focus is on studying and completing assessments, there will certainly be tasks that require high concentration levels (such as reading and understanding a chapter), and tasks that are less demanding on your concentration (such as remembering information, typing up a reference list for your assignment).

- Schedule tasks that require high concentration levels for times when you are most alert.
- All other tasks can be scheduled around these high concentration tasks. For example, if you are less alert in the evenings after dinner, you can use this time to format your assignment, find research on the Internet, do housework, socialise etc.

Sometimes we have the benefit of having 'dead' time when we are engaged in tasks for which we may be able to do another task at the same time – in effect, to multitask. Travelling time is one such opportunity if you take public transport; you may be able to use this time to revise lecture notes, to test your memory of significant theories or studies in your subjects, to plan a timetable for the coming week, to plan social activities or listen to music or re-listen to an audio lecture.

While multitasking may seem to be the magical cure for our time management problems, in reality it can be a double-edged sword. There is a difference between useful multitasking – for example, making the most of 'dead' time – and inefficient multitasking. Research has shown that multitasking can actually be counterproductive. Specifically, each time you switch from one task to another, there is a cost associated in refocusing your attention. Overall, switching from a familiar task or switching to an unfamiliar task is associated with larger time costs.

Each time you shift from one task to another, you have to refocus your attention. You may even spend more time trying to do both tasks simultaneously, than each task in sequence.



Examples of inefficient multitasking include:

- a) Studying while watching television,
- b) Driving while talking on your mobile,
- c) Working on an assignment on the computer with your email open so that you read it each time you have a new message.

These are inefficient because both tasks in each example demand your concentration and attention, and you cannot attend to both simultaneously without your performance on either task suffering. In contrast, travelling on public transport requires minimal concentration, thus you are able to focus effectively on another task.

In order to use your time efficiently:

- Be realistic when identifying which tasks are compatible from a multitasking perspective.
- Examine where you can eliminate 'wasteful' time. For example, if there is a television show that you must watch, rather than try to study simultaneously and end up feeling like you have not accomplished anything, record the program; you can then watch the replay and skip the commercials.

Step 5: Reward and recharge yourself to maximise efficiency

Staying on track with your time management plan is easier when you reward yourself regularly. This means scheduling in time to treat yourself to something that you like – whether it is spending time with friends, spending time on a hobby, or spending time just relaxing and resting. Your mind and body need rest and recharging in order to function optimally.



Sometimes students find it difficult to justify taking a break, particularly at times such as exam times or late in the university semester when assignments are due. Not only that, but they cut down on exercise, sleep, and a healthy diet. Instead, it is often replaced by late nights spent cramming or rushing to finish assignments, living on unhealthy takeaway food, and using caffeine to stay awake.

One way to think about why it is important to reward yourself and to relax is to think of your body as a car. In order to ensure that your car maintains its peak performance, you would make sure that you rest it (certainly, you wouldn't drive it non-stop for 20 hours in a day!), make sure that you put the right type of fuel in it so that it runs properly, and maintain it regularly. Your body and mind function on much the same premise – it needs rest, the right types of food, exercise, variety of activities and generally looking after. That way, you are able to function with maximum efficiency.

Rewarding you and recharging your batteries therefore become Quadrant 2 tasks in the Time Management Matrix. However, it is important to note that they can easily fall into the Quadrant 4 activities. Where the line is drawn, of course, is subjective. A useful guide is whether the task is truly aimed at relaxing and recharging, or whether you are procrastinating to avoid doing an unpleasant task. If it is in the latter category, it is most likely to be a Quadrant 4 task.

Step 6: Review regularly



Circumstances change from time to time, predictably with increasing workload towards the end of the university semester, but also with changes in work and personal circumstances. These will impact on how your time is managed. Regularly review how your time management plan is working in order to increase its effectiveness.

Troubleshooting... when time management doesn't work



Problem I can't seem to get anything done.

Causes Procrastination, feeling depressed, feeling anxious – these can all affect your ability to maintain motivation and stay on track.

Solutions Procrastination – or putting off a necessary task – is something that we all do from time to time. Procrastination can have many contributing factors. See also the information on perfectionism available from the Counselling Service. One way to manage procrastination (due to feeling overwhelmed or uncertain about what to do) is to break a larger, more overwhelming task into smaller, less overwhelming steps. For example, the larger goal of 'finishing an assignment' can be broken down to the following steps:

- 1) Decide on topic,
- 2) Gather readings on the topic,
- 3) Read an article/chapter and note down ideas (repeat this sequence for as many articles/chapters as there are)
- 4) Draft a detailed essay plan (outline topic for each paragraph)
- 5) Write the introduction
- 6) Write the body
- 7) Write the conclusion
- 8) Write reference list
- 9) Revise essay draft
- 10) Proofread

By breaking down the task, you get a clear idea what needs to be accomplished step-by-step to achieve the overall goal of finishing the assignment. Also, seeing a goal as 'read one article/chapter and write down notes' is less overwhelming than finishing the whole assignment, and you are more likely to make a start on it.

Another strategy is to use a '20 minute rule' where you focus on the task for that period of time. When 20 minutes is up, if you have gained momentum and can keep going then great, if not then at least you have already done 20 minutes of that task.

Procrastination is often linked with feeling depressed or feeling anxious. If these feelings interfere with your studies and your life in general, it may be helpful to speak to a mental health professional (e.g. psychologist, counsellor) who can help you to get back on track.

- Problem** While I spend hours drawing up a timetable, my timetabled activities keep moving on to the next day and the next week.
- Causes** This is likely to be caused by both overestimating how much time you have available, and underestimating the amount of time required for completing the tasks.
- Solutions** Go back to Step 1 (Identifying how long tasks *actually* take), and Step 2 (Identify how much time you really have).
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- Problem** There just isn't enough time to get everything done.
- Causes** Many people mistake time management as the same as finding ways to fit even more in to an already busy schedule. The reality is that time management is meant to help you focus your available time so that you can achieve goals that are important and meaningful to you, rather than try to do everything.
- Solutions** Refer to Step 3 (Prioritise your tasks). Learn to identify which tasks on your 'To Do' list are important, which tasks are less important, and which tasks are distractions. Focus on achieving the tasks that are important first, so that distractions can be completed if you have any extra time rather than taking away time from more important activities.
- It may also be useful to refer to Step 4 (Use your time efficiently) to see if you are making the most of what time you have available to you.

This handout is based on the following resources:

Buelher, R., Griffin, D., & Ross, M. (1994). Exploring the planning fallacy: Why people underestimate their task completion times. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, *67*, 366-381.

Casal, G.B., Caballo, V.E., & Cueto, E.G. (1990). Differences between morning and evening types in performance. Personality and Individual Differences, *11*, 447-450.

Cummins, A., & Chong, J. (2006). Fight that sinking feeling: Overcome procrastination! Perth: Curtin University of Technology.

Covey, S.R. (1989). The 7 habits of highly effective people. Melbourne: The business library.

Girard, N.J. (2007). Multitasking: How much is too much? AORN Journal, *85*, 505-506.

Rubinstein, J.S., Meyer, D.E., & Evans, J.E. (2001). Executive control of cognitive processes in task switching. Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance, *27*, 763-797.

Wallis, C. (2006). The multitasking generation. Time, *167*, 48-54.

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