

# Organising your time

This guide offers you strategies to help you plan your time effectively, encouraging you to maximise your productivity and maintain optimum control over your activities. Effective time management creates, divides and allocates time – it is an active process.

Another useful guide from Student Learning Development is *Thought mapping*

## Part one: planning time

Planning is an essential part of being organised. It involves predicting your future commitments and setting aside enough time to meet them. Successful planning gives you confidence and purpose.

### Five steps to successful planning

#### 1. Looking ahead

An important first step is to establish:

- what you need to do (e.g. coursework/taught sessions/private study);
- when things need to be done by (e.g. deadlines for assessed work);
- how long they are likely to take (e.g. time spent in taught sessions/time required to write a lab. report).

Read through your course handbooks and other information related to your modules to establish the demands that will be placed upon your time. Think of the broad range of study activities and develop a picture of how they relate to each other. This forward picture will be an invaluable tool in helping you organise your time.

#### 2. Making plans

Once you have established your commitments, it might be useful to enter these on a plan or calendar. Plan each semester at a time.

There are several advantages to using a wall chart for this activity.

- You can see the whole semester ahead of you.
- You can see where deadlines fall in relationship to each other.
- You can quickly scan the whole plan to remind yourself of the full range of your activities.

If you already have plans in a calendar or diary, use these in the same way. Construct a visual image of the term ahead, one that you can scan quickly to refresh and review.

Make filling in your plan an active process. Use colour and image to distinguish between different sorts of activities. For example, fill in deadlines in red, starting points in green. Use exclamation marks as warning signs or question marks to highlight vague commitments.

Continually review your long term plan, assessing your achievements or adding further information as it arises.

#### 3. Breaking up time

To begin taking control of your time you will need to break it up into manageable chunks. Try the following strategies for planning each day a week at a time.

## Planning the week

Your study time over a week will be divided into two broad areas:

- your contact time or taught sessions (lectures, tutorials, laboratory classes);
- your private study activities (working on projects, reading for an essay).

Draw up a timetable for the week showing each day and each hour within that day. Fill in your taught sessions for the week ahead. This will give you a clear idea of the time you can allocate to other activities, showing you when you have time and how much time is available.

Now begin to allocate time to your other activities. Don't try to fulfil your study obligations in a few long sessions. Make the best use of all the time available to you by being creative in your use of time. For example:

- use an evening to plan your essay;
- use an hour between lectures to visit the library;
- use a ten minute bus journey to review your lecture notes.

Try to fit the right tasks to the right time slots. Don't try to write a presentation in half an hour at the end of the day if you know you will be tired. Move this activity to a more suitable time when you will have the energy to complete the task to your best abilities. Instead, attempt more mundane tasks such as organising notes.

When planning your week, remember to balance your long-term commitments with your short term ones. Effective time management involves doing the right thing at the right time.

## Planning a day

As each new day approaches, review your week plan to make sure that it is up to date. Make a 'to do' list for each day if this will help focus your activities.

- Use your day plan to add discipline to your working day.
- Be active with your plan. Tick off completed tasks and keep a check on uncompleted activity.
- Avoid overburdening your day plan - only set out to complete realistic tasks.

## 4. Setting priorities

You may find that within a week you will need to tackle more than one task at a time. Find a way of putting multiple tasks in order, establishing a list of priorities. A priority graph (Figure 1) can be used to judge whether something is a priority or not. Put a cross on the graph for each task you need to complete. If it goes in the top right corner (Important/Urgent) it is an immediate priority. If it goes in the bottom left corner (Not Urgent/Unimportant), you should question why you were thinking about doing it in the first place!

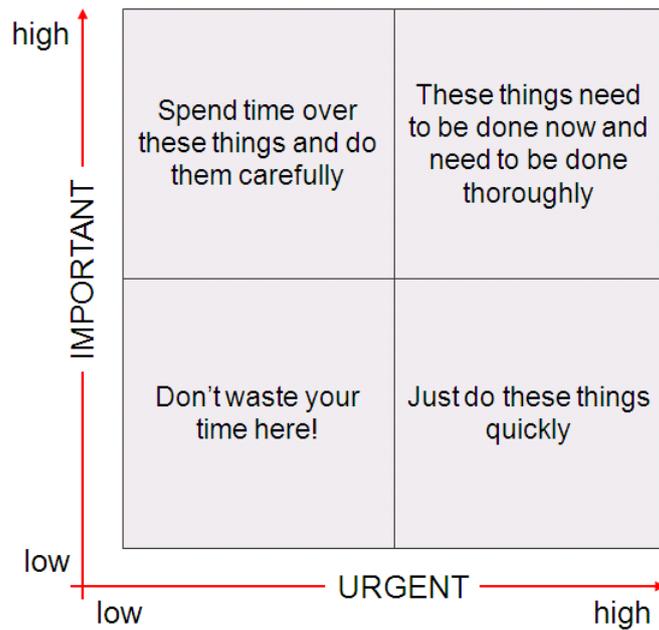


Figure 1: Priority graph

## 5. Reviewing progress

It is important to continually review your planning strategy to make sure that it is up to date (an ineffective time manager allows all of their priority points to slide towards the top right hand corner of their graph when everything is urgent and everything needs to be done yesterday!). Try to avoid this by forward planning, predicting any possible glitches and pitfalls.

## Part two: using time

It is important to find ways of motivating your mind and stimulating your thoughts when working for an extended period. The following tips look at ways of keeping your mind fresh and active whilst studying. Always remember to avoid passive behaviour. Work actively, pursuing goals, achieving targets and reaping rewards.

### Getting started

Begin a work session by making sure that the task is achievable in the time set. Split a task that's too big into smaller tasks. Also, make sure that you are clear about the task itself. Setting clear, attainable goals will improve your motivation considerably.

Set a definite end point - "*I know I will have finished when...*".

Set clear rewards - "*When I have finished I will ...*"

If you have a few study tasks that you don't enjoy doing, try forcing yourself to do these at the beginning of a work session. Get them over and done with so that you can reward yourself with more interesting work. Above all, avoid putting them to the end of your 'to do' list - they will stay there forever!

### Keeping going

Make sure that you introduce variety into your work. Avoid doing the same thing for hours on end; your brain will soon tire and you will cease to be productive. Break up long periods of activity by checking what you have achieved or reviewing your objectives. Make the most of natural breaks; pause when you come to the end of a chapter or complete an exercise. Take these opportunities to reward yourself and rekindle enthusiasm.

If you are really struggling to maintain concentration, stop and review your activities. You might not have set clear goals or engaged your mind in an active way. Avoid pushing on regardless of your ability to concentrate; you will rarely be productive and will be wasting your energies.

### **Taking breaks**

Take breaks when and if you need to. This may be when your concentration is slipping, or when you have been staring at the computer screen for too long. However, try to avoid distractions such as an interesting television programme or a conversation with friends. Keep your mind focused on your work; this is important if you are to resume work in a productive and focused way.

### **Knowing when to stop**

Once you have achieved your tasks, stop working. Maintain a sense of achievement and carry this through to your next work session. Avoid starting things you know you won't be able to finish or might be too tired to devote proper time to. If you have spare time, reward yourself with something interesting but unessential.

### **Know your own obstacles**

There are many reasons why we avoid using time effectively. Some of these include:

- lack of motivation;
- poor concentration;
- noisy working environment.

Try to be active in overcoming your personal obstacles. If you know you try and ignore less interesting or difficult tasks then tackle them straight away before rewarding yourself with more stimulating work.

## **Summary**

Organising your time is a personal process. You will need to find a way of monitoring and planning your activities that suits you. If you prefer written lists then use them. If you prefer to work from plans and diagrams then use those instead. Continually reflect upon your approach to planning. Make it work for you.

- Be clear about what you have got to do and when it has got to be done by.
- Use a term planner to help gauge your productivity over time.
- Use a week planner to set a clear agenda for the week ahead.
- Use a 'to do' list as a prompt to remind you of the tasks you have dedicated to that day.
- Use time effectively by setting and sticking to clear realistic objectives.

This study guide is one of a series produced by Student Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills.

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