Managing your time at university

Managing time well is an important part of university life. Undergraduate and graduate students alike want to do well at school, stay healthy, and do many other things—all within a 168-hour week.

University has its own challenges for managing time: the workload is demanding, there are plenty of distractions, and days are often unstructured. It's easy to let time slip by.

Stay in charge of your time and your success! Being clear about what's important to you and using your time intentionally will help you have a satisfying, successful, less stressful university experience.

Prioritizing

Prioritizing is difficult to do well at first, but it's **essential** for planning your time effectively; if you don't prioritize you might miss important deadlines, or spend time on one task at the expense of a more important or urgent task. It's also a skill **you can improve with practice**. Here are a few methods; try different ones until you find one that suits you.

Matrix method: Use the time management matrix to help you identify which tasks you should do first.

Try to accomplish some important, non-urgent goals every week. This habit will keep you out of last minute, crisis mode.

A-B-C method

Categorize your tasks into:

- A: must do today or tomorrow
- B: might do today if there's time, but can delay for a few days or a week
- C: can delay for more than a week

Prioritize:

- the hardest tasks
- the tasks due first
- the assignments worth the most marks
- the tasks that support your goals
- **work *before* you relax.** Reward yourself each day after solid, sustained effort.

Mark each task with an A, B, or C, then schedule the tasks accordingly.

Where does your time go?

Start by figuring out how you currently spend your time. Try filling in our weekly time use chart. Take a look at your results; are you surprised by how little or how much time you have left over, or how you spend some of your time? Do you wish you had more time for some activities? Keep reading for

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strategies for setting goals, prioritizing activities, and managing your time, or check out our procrastination and concentration pages.

To-do lists

Many students rely on their to-do lists to stay organized and get tasks done on time. A to-do list can help you:

- achieve your short- and long-term goals
- reduce stress and feel more in control of your life
- avoid forgetting things
- prioritize
- fill in your weekly schedule and term calendar.

One method for making a to-do list

- Use whatever tools you prefer: pen and paper, sticky notes, an agenda, an app, a document saved on your laptop.
- Have on hand a calendar with coursework deadlines and important personal dates.
- List everything you can think of that you need to do in a month or a term: administrative tasks, projects, readings, laundry, errands, etc.
- Try not to worry about how much there is on the list at this point.
- Break down large tasks (e.g., "create COMMS 234 presentation") into **small, specific tasks** (e.g., "email COMM 234 group members to set next meeting date," "choose topic," "assign tasks among group members," etc.).
- Make sure everything on the list starts with a **verb**, for example, "*write* methods section of lab report."
- If a task has a specific deadline, note it down.
- You might find it helpful to think of this as a master list, not a daily list. As the week goes by, keep track of new additions to your to-do list on a separate list, and add them to the master list on a daily or weekly basis (use the process below).

What to do with a to-do list

Assess the list:

- Maybe some of the items aren't that important or urgent, and could be postponed or deleted. This is a good strategy to use when you're busy.
- If an item will take you just a minute or two, do it right away and cross it off your list.

For the remaining tasks:

- **prioritize** which should be done first, second, etc.
- **estimate** the time needed for each task; be a bit generous with this estimate

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- **schedule** the tasks into your weekly or monthly schedule according your priorities and time estimates. Be realistic.

Each week, set aside 30 minutes on Sunday night to **review** your list and the upcoming week. What tasks need to be accomplished? Do you need to add anything else to your list? Schedule tasks into your week. If you have trouble prioritizing, refer to your short-term goals. **Each evening,** set aside 5-10 minutes to make a realistic to-do list for the next day. Refer to your weekly goals to help set priorities.

If you don't like to-do lists

Do you find to-do lists stressful? Is it impossible to cross off all the items on your list? Try:

- making sure everything on your list is specific and starts with a verb
- breaking larger tasks into smaller ones that you can do in an hour or less
- keeping a master list and then transferring just 2-3 of your highest-priority tasks from that list onto a daily to-do list
- checking out some of our strategies for prioritizing tasks and avoiding procrastination
- instead of a daily to-do list, track your accomplishments for the day as you go, and compare it to your weekly goals.

Estimating time

Estimating time accurately will help you get tasks done on time with less stress, and protect the time you've set aside for sleeping, relaxing, eating and exercising—it's an important skill! You'll get better at it with experience.

It's easier to estimate time more accurately for smaller tasks than bigger ones, which is another reason to break big projects down into smaller, specific tasks.

Be realistic. Don't try to get everything done in a day. It's better to have a short to-do list and complete it than to feel overwhelmed by a long list of tasks.

On average, students should spend about **8-10 hours per course each week**, attending class and labs/tutorials and completing homework. If you're an undergraduate student taking five courses, you should spend about **45-50 hours per week** on school. **Think of school as your full-time job.**

For example, if you are taking five courses and spend 20 hours total in class / lab time each week, expect to also spend about 25-30 hours on homework each week (5 courses x 9 hours per course = 45 hours per week total for school; 45 hours total – 20 hours in class = 25 hours of homework).

Graduate school has its own rhythm, but try treating school as a full-time job and then modify your time commitment as you understand the demands better.

Scheduling

You can use our weekly schedule and monthly calendar templates to plan how to spend your time. They come with instructions to help you achieve scheduling success!

Use a **weekly schedule** to:

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- protect time for sleeping, eating, and exercise
- keep track of classes and other commitments
- choose when to work on specific tasks
- plan flexibility and relaxation time.

Use a **term calendar** to:

- keep track of due dates and how much assignments/exams are worth
- see the big picture of the whole term
- plan ahead for busier weeks.

Scheduling tips

- Taking time to sleep, exercise and eat well is critical to your academic success.
- It's a *lot* more effective to do some work every day of the week / term than to cram it in last-minute. Easier said than done; if you struggle with this habit, try a learning strategies appointment.
- Know yourself. When you schedule tasks, consider what time of day you work best.
- Do the hard tasks first to set the tone for the day and motivate yourself.
- University offers wonderful opportunities. Don't just bury your head in your books for four years; make time to try new things.

Helpful tools

- Term calendar: use the instructions to fill it in and see the whole term at a glance.
- Weekly schedule: use the instructions to fill it in to plan your week. See a how-to video here.
- Weekly time use chart: see how you spend your time. An eye-opener for many students.
- Steven Covey's Time Management Matrix
- Course Planner
- Assignment planner: use this tool to break large assignments into small tasks with mini-deadlines; get tips and resources for each stage.
- Thesis manager: for **graduate** students; helps you see the big picture and break down the thesis process into small, manageable stages with mini-deadlines.
- End of term planning chart: fill this in to get a handle on what's left to do, how long it will take, and how much it's worth. A helpful tool to regroup and prioritize around Weeks 9-12 of a term.
- Task Analysis Chart: break a big task into smaller parts and estimate how long each will take.

Efficiency tips

- Consider school your full-time job.

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- Use the free time between classes to do homework.
- Do difficult tasks first.
- Work for a maximum of 3 hours at a time, and then take a break for an hour or so.
- Work for 50 minutes, then take a break for 10 (or work for 25 and break for 5); repeat.
- Reduce distractions.
- Adopt routines. They take the decision-making out of your day.
- Try mindfulness techniques to stay focused and calm.
- Work before relaxing. Earn a reward.

Troubleshooting guide

"I make a to-do list every day but never get through it. Then I feel guilty."

- Make a weekly to-do list. Then try limiting your daily to-do list to only three items. If you have extra time, tackle the next thing on your weekly to-do list. Or try using a to-do list that covers two or three days. Or keep a list of completed tasks instead.

"I make schedules but I can't seem to follow them."

- Try making your schedule realistic, not idealistic. When are you really going to start studying: 7:00 a.m.? 9:30 a.m.? How many hours a week will you really commit to? Remember to leave room for downtime.
- Try booking an appointment with a learning strategist.

"I spend too much time on online activities. Then I don't have time to work or sleep."

- Try scheduling specific times for these activities, with a limit of how long you'll spend doing them. Then, *turn off, close, and log out* when you're trying to work or sleep.
- See our advice on managing distractions or book an appointment with a learning strategist.

"I have trouble deciding what to do first."

- Consider due dates, how much time is needed to do the task, and how many marks it's worth, if others are depending on you, and how important it is for your goals. See our prioritizing strategies.

Graduate students

Graduate school presents its own time management complexities that may challenge your skills. Approaches or habits that worked well for you in other contexts might not work as well for you now. We offer some practical information here.

You may also like to book a learning strategies appointment, or visit our graduate student page or our faculty / TA resources page for more help and resources.

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Time challenges for graduate students

- long-term, complex projects
- unclear academic expectations
- multiple competing roles (academic and non-academic)
- lack of structure in a week
- distracting negative feelings such as self-doubt, worry, and guilt
- lack of accountability or feedback on progress.

Time management strategies for graduate students

- Don't wait! Create structure as early in the term as possible; see our resources on setting goals, managing time, using to-do lists, prioritizing, and scheduling.
- Try the thesis manager.
- Schedule quiet time for thinking and writing.
- Schedule time for relaxation, sleep, and exercise to stay motivated, happy and healthy.
- Set daily routines; they save time and mental effort.
- Organize your workspace, digital files, emails and paperwork to save time.
- Reduce/manage your distractions.
- Meet with your supervisor regularly; send follow-up emails listing key discussion points.
- Email your supervisor regularly with updates (accomplishments, challenges, questions).
- Keep a record of weekly goals and achievements and next intended steps and share these with your supervisor at each meeting. Review the list daily to stay on track.
- Track your progress on a calendar.
- Explain your student life to your partner/family/friends, and enlist their cooperation.
- Schedule time for the important people in your personal life.
- Check out our procrastination and focus and concentration resources.

Planning large projects

Large projects, such as researching and writing a thesis, may span several years; most graduate students don't have training or experience in this level of project management.

Even if you have clear goals and solid time management skills, large projects might be daunting. In addition, some aspects of the project might not be in your control (e.g., waiting for your supervisor to read and provide feedback on your work). Large projects may also compete with other tasks, both academic and personal. The thesis manager can help you break a thesis down into smaller steps with timelines.

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It can also be helpful to think through some of the following questions, and/or discuss them with your supervisor, as you plan your thesis or another large project:

- What are my academic and administrative responsibilities?
- To whom am I accountable?
- When do I want to finish my project? When are major deadlines?
- How do my major deadlines translate into smaller tasks from week to week?
- What happens if I don't finish on time? Do I need a backup plan?
- What aspects of the project do I control, totally or to some extent? Who else has control, in what ways?
- What feedback/support can I expect from my supervisor/others?
- What are my priorities? How will I manage competing priorities?
- How will I maintain a healthy balance between my academic and personal life?
- How will I sustain my energy and a positive attitude to the project?
- How will I know when it's time to let go and move onto something else?
- How can I manage perfectionism and/or procrastination?

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