

Motivation and Procrastination

Do you ever feel like you just can't get started? You're not alone. Avoiding tasks and putting things off is a habit, and **you can change it**. Try some of our recommended strategies to get back on track.

Motivation and procrastination can be **difficult to manage on your own**. For individual help, please book an [appointment with an academic skills specialist](#).

You might also enjoy [Dr. Timothy Pychyl's podcasts](#) on procrastination.

Start with yourself

Start by reflecting briefly on your own work habits. Be kind to yourself as you reflect; we are all learning.

When it's time to work on a task, do you...

- avoid it?
- need pressure to get started?
- feel stressed or guilty?
- feel dissatisfied with your results?
- keep polishing one assignment at the expense of meeting deadlines or completing other projects?

What prompts your procrastination? Perhaps...

- you **don't understand** what's expected
- you **have difficulty committing** to a topic or decision
- you **don't feel like working** or getting started
- the task seems **intimidating, unpleasant or boring**
- you **spend too much time** on one project
- you **doubt** the result is good enough, so you keep working.

Are your barriers related to:

- the specific **task**?
- your work **habits**?
- your attitude or **mindset**?

Now that you may have more insight into your habits, use the other sections in this topic to help yourself improve your motivation.

Set goals

Successfully completing even small steps toward a personally meaningful goal can be very motivating. It's easier to spend your time intentionally when you know what matters most to you.



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What are 2-3 areas of your life that you want to do really well at this year? You can't do everything, so make some choices. Take some time to think about what's important to you, then work on setting goals. Goals are most effective when they are:

- specific
- realistic (can you achieve this goal with your resources, time, etc.?)
- measurable (how will you know when you've achieved this goal?)
- given a timeline
- written down and reviewed as needed.

For example: "I want to further my education" is too vague to assess whether it is realistic or measurable, and it lacks a timeline; but "I want to complete a master's degree in biology at Queen's within the next two years," could meet all the above criteria. Write down your long-term goals—things you hope to achieve in a year, or five years—using the criteria above. You might consider goals related to your:

- family and friends
- education
- career
- health
- volunteering
- finances
- other interests.

Review these goals at the beginning or end of a school year to see how far you've moved toward achieving them, and if they are still important to you.

Next, write down shorter-term goals that support your long-term goals. For example, you might write, "I want to earn at least a B+ on my fourth-year biology research paper due on April 20."

Review these goals every month or two. Post your goals somewhere visible; remind yourself of them when you're having trouble prioritizing competing demands on your to-do list, or when you lack motivation.

Set goals that matter to you

Thinking about what you value in life, and how these values translate into long-term goals, can help you think more clearly about your short-term goals and make better decisions about how to use your time from day to day. Values are core ideas you have about the worth of something, and the judgments you make about what is important in life. Our values influence how we use our time.

For example, in a spare half-hour, someone who values orderliness may spend that time organizing their desk and work files, while someone who values fitness may go for a run. You might like to write down your life values. (If you have trouble identifying them, there are lots of places you can find inspiration: online, in books or blogs, talking with family or friends or a spiritual advisor, etc.)

Afterwards, you might find it helpful to translate some of your values into long-term goals.



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It's common for goals to change over time; goals are closely tied to our identities and values, which develop as we move through life. If you'd like to talk to someone as you clarify your values and goals, see an [academic advisor](#), a [career counsellor](#), a [personal counsellor](#) and/or Queen's [Faith and Spiritual Life](#).

Prepare to change

What about your work habits would you like to change? Write down one or two things. Be specific. Why do you want to make this change?

- Think about the consequences you've faced in the past when you've delayed working on a task, or [had low motivation for something](#).
- If you continue to procrastinate, what will be the costs? If you change, what will be the rewards?
- Write down three reasons to make this change.

Ask yourself, on a scale of 1 to 10:

- How important is it that I change?
- How confident am I that I can change?
- How ready am I to change now?

Write down any barriers to change you can think of. As you read through the sections below, note down resources or strategies that you think will help you reduce these barriers. Keep your notes somewhere visible, such as at your desk or on a sticky note on your laptop.

Strategies to change

When the problem is the task

Many people put off tasks when they aren't sure how to proceed. If you find yourself avoiding an unfamiliar task, try these strategies:

- Clarify the task, its purpose and deadline.
- Break big tasks down into small, specific steps and tackle them one at a time.
- Ask your professor, TA or classmates if you have questions.
- Get help; try the [research librarians](#), the SASS [writing consultants](#), the [math help centre](#), etc.
- Use the [assignment planner](#) or [thesis manager](#) to develop a plan with small steps, dates, and specific resources.

When the problem is your work habits

Habits and routines are powerful; adopting ones that remove the "will I or won't I?" decisions out of your day allows you to be more productive.

- Develop a balanced daily routine that works for you. Build in time for meals, sleep, exercise, work time and relaxation time. Try our [time management](#) strategies and tools to get organized.
- [Reduce distractions](#) to improve your focus.



- Try working at the same time of day, at the same location.
- Do challenging tasks when you're most awake.
- Work with a motivated friend.
- Try the "five more" rule to get started or keep working:
 - commit to five more minutes, pages, sentences, problems, etc.
 - do it and congratulate yourself.
 - make a choice: do five more, or stop.
- If you tend to overwork papers, limit the time or number of edits you allow yourself.
- If you think you work only under pressure, create an artificially short final deadline.
- Set multiple small deadlines for each stage of a project; share these deadlines with an accountability buddy—someone who will hold you to your promises.

When the problem is your mindset

Be aware of your emotions as you approach or avoid a task. Discomfort is a signal. Ask yourself: are you unsure, bored, intimidated?

- If you feel uncomfortable, don't give in!
- Stay on task, even just for a few minutes at first. Take one, very small, concrete step towards completing the task. Getting started is the hardest part, so keep the first step as small as you need to, so you actually do it.
- Congratulate yourself, and then identify the next very small step. Repeat.
- Practice this approach to staying on task, so you develop the ability to work for longer, despite unpleasant feelings.
- If you have lost interest in your school work, look at your school-life balance. Do you give yourself time to relax and recharge? Make a [change](#) and [reduce your stress](#) if you need to.
- Examine your standards. Is perfect your goal? Is it realistic? Give yourself permission to do work that is good enough.
- Face challenges with, "I haven't learned this well enough, yet."
- Avoid comparing yourself to others.
- Remember that intelligence is not fixed. Your abilities will strengthen with effort.
- Use the [resources](#) available to you; talk with an [academic advisor](#), [SASS staff](#), or a trusted prof.

Developing new habits

- Clearly and specifically define a habit you want to adopt. Start small.
- Link the new habit (ex., taking a walk) with an existing one (making coffee in the morning).
- Start today.
- Have an accountability buddy—someone who will start your new habit with you, or hold you to your promises.
- Keep in mind that it can take a few weeks of daily practice to establish a new habit. Keep trying; it all adds up.
- Be proud of your accomplishments.
- Enjoy the rewards of your efforts (feeling calmer, meeting deadlines, a sense of pride, etc.).
- Stay positive and resilient. Setbacks may happen, but you can persist.

- Accept that discomfort and effort are part of developing a new habit or attitude. Do it anyway; it will get easier over time.
- Remind yourself of your original reasons for wanting to change.



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