

# Time Management, Overcoming Procrastination and Stress Management

Oxford terms are notoriously short so it is obvious that it is an advantage to be able to manage your time well. But it is equally important to be able to stay calm if things slip and you need to catch up.

## I. Time Management

Some practical suggestions:

- Take control: buy a diary or a week-by-week planner.
- Write down deadlines and fixed commitments.
- Decide how much study you want to do each week and each day.
- Plan blocks of study with breaks in between. Decide what length of time suits you best. Spacing out your study with breaks in between is usually more efficient than massing it into one or two days.
- Break down big tasks (e.g. 'read all of reading list!') into smaller, more easily achievable tasks.
- Build in time for rest and relaxation.
- Be flexible and be prepared for plans to change: don't make your schedule so crowded that you can't cope with delays or distractions.
- Work with your biological clock. When do you work best? Schedule your most important tasks for those hours.
- Review your plans and plan ahead every few days. Deciding on your hours of work and monitoring your hours can help you prevent guilt and stress. Once you have completed your target hours, you can enjoy your time off. If you struggle to meet your target one day, you can work out how to catch up calmly.
- Keep a daily 'to-do' list listing what **must** be done today, what **should** be done today and what **might** be done today.
- Try 'batching' to avoid distractions: set aside a period of time each day to read and write emails, surf the web, check your phone, deal with post and paperwork. Don't let yourself be continually interrupted.

## II. Overcoming Procrastination

People procrastinate (from the Latin for 'to put off till tomorrow') for a variety of reasons:

- Lack of time management skills, lack of experience of self-management
- Underestimating the task required
- Lack of interest in the task
- Aversion to discomfort: once you get used to putting things off, it's hard to break through the 'pain' barrier
- Anxiety about failing, about not being good enough, feeling overwhelmed
- Difficulty in concentrating because of personal problems

Some strategies for overcoming procrastination:

- Make sure you are physically prepared with the right materials, light, comfort, location etc. But don't allow preparation to become a form of procrastination in itself.
- Allow for 'warming up' when you first sit down to study: don't expect a high level of efficiency straight away. Simply going through the motions for a few minutes can help to get you started, even if you don't feel you are achieving much.
- If the task feels overwhelmingly big or difficult, break it down into smaller goals: reading one chapter, writing one page, working for 45 minutes then taking a 15 minutes break.
- If you get stuck, don't stop but try something different. If you're struggling to write, scribble some rough notes instead. Or work on a different piece of work or a different part of the essay, or work in a different way.
- Reward yourself when you complete a task. Do something different or allow yourself to do nothing and relax. Famously, "procrastination is the thief of time". By overcoming procrastination, you can take back more time for yourself.
- Accept that there is no 'magic wand': you will have to do this task or accept the consequences of not doing the task.
- Don't think that you '**have to**' and '**can't**' do this piece of work. Instead, tell yourself that you **choose** to or **choose not to** do this work. Why don't you choose to do it? Try to work out *why* you are procrastinating. What do you *gain* from procrastination? How can you change your behaviour?

### III. Feeling Overwhelmed and Anxious

Everybody worries some of the time. But if you are worrying and feeling overwhelmed and anxious about your academic work for a lot of the time, you need to try to deal with these negative emotions.

Some strategies for dealing with academic anxiety:

- Remember you are here to experiment, to try things out, to make mistakes and to learn from those. Work for College tutors doesn't have to be perfect every time: rather it has to be a genuine attempt which you and your tutor can work to improve. If you were perfect there would be nothing to learn.
- Remind yourself of things you have done well in the past. It's very easy to focus on negative criticism whilst forgetting all the praise.
- Accept that you will find things difficult at times: this is what *higher* education is all about. It is meant to challenge you, unsettle you and be thought-provokingly complex.
- Producing something is always better than producing nothing, even if you think it's not as good as it should be. Your tutor would always rather see a genuine attempt than have nothing at all.
- Think about what you would say to a friend who was worrying about the same things. Then treat yourself in that same friendly way.
- Make sure your 'self-talk' (i.e. the voice in your mind that tells you how things are) is positive, realistic and optimistic.
- Try not to ruminate, i.e. think about worrisome things over and over again. If you find yourself ruminating, share your thoughts with a friend or College advisor.

- Make sure you have some moments in each week where you forget the academic treadmill for a while: take some exercise, go for a walk, have fun with friends, do an extra-curricular activity.

Material prepared by Dr Jenni Nuttall.