

DEATH BY DEADLINE

INTRODUCTION

Working in long, intense stretches in the attempt to meet an impending due date is affectionately known among time management types as "death by deadline." Some students claim that there's no point in starting projects (particularly essays) until the last minute because they've convinced themselves that they must have an impending deadline to inspire productivity and quality work.

For some of these students, procrastinating till the last hour serves a dual purpose. The first, as they claim, is that a deadline motivates them to work intensely on the task. For others, however, there may be something more complex at work. For students who are perfectionistic, procrastinating leaves them a critical emotional "out" that keeps their self esteem in tact even if the mark received on the assignment is not up to their standards.

Students who are perfectionistic may not realize that they are this way, or, if they do know they're perfectionistic, may not realize why perfectionism is not a good thing. They may not be aware of the incredible impact that perfectionism is having on the way they work and manage their time. If you consider yourself a perfectionist, particularly if you've been identified as intellectually gifted, you might find it useful to meet with [learning professional](#).

Like any other method of time management, death by deadline has its pros and cons (see below).



THE PROS OF DEATH BY DEADLINE

- Allows a lot of free time between the periods of intense work. As one student explained, "Why should I spend days and days working on an essay when I can write one in four or five hours?"
- Provides reassurance that you have the ability and endurance to work hard ... occasionally.
- Aids in the development of strong skills in sucking up to instructors because of the frequent need to request extensions on due dates.
- Provides a source of (somewhat warped) glamour and heroism among fellow students:
 - "I just pulled my third all-nighter of the semester." (Translation: "I am cool.")
 - "I did this paper in four hours and got a B." (Translation: "I am so smart and so good that I don't have to be a geek and work hard or spend a lot of time to get good marks.")
 - "I just started my 40% paper last night and it's due tomorrow." (Translation: "To demonstrate that I have better things to do than school work, I am daring and willing to take big risks with my marks.")
- Gives an adrenalin rush not unlike that experienced by gamblers - there's always the risk that your instructor is going to call your bluff, recognize that you rushed through the assignment at the last minute and give you a rotten mark.

Unfortunately students who are skilled and highly practised at this method of working often do get good marks. So what's the problem with working this way?

THE CONS OF DEATH BY DEADLINE

- A highly stressful way to work and live.
- Creates a dependency on a working style in order to be productive that can rarely be maintained in the working world.
- Success is highly dependent on a particular lifestyle - the ability to drop absolutely everything (including sleeping and eating) to meet a deadline, a situation which is sometimes not possible for students (and always not possible for some others) and usually not possible after graduation when you are working.
- Risky and dangerous. What if you get sick? What if someone in your family gets sick? What if your boy/girlfriend suddenly dumps you? What if a friend or sibling is in trouble and needs you? What if you can't get research materials or lab time you need? What if you get writer's block? What if your computer crashes or you lose your flash drive with vital information?
- What happens when there's more than one deadline at the same time? This is perhaps the most serious drawback of the death by deadline method of working. While many students find that they can endure working in intense spurts distributed through most of the semester, it's the crunch times (like several major assignments due in the same week) when this method of working finally catches up and takes its toll, both on students themselves (burnout, sleep deprivation, illness, etc.) and on their marks.
- Denies you the opportunity to ever truly test the limits of your abilities. Some students claim that they wouldn't do better no matter how much time they put into their assignments, and certainly getting a good mark after procrastinating re-inforces this belief. But the bottom line is how do you know you wouldn't or couldn't do better when there is never enough time to really do your best work or put in your best effort? Interestingly enough, for some students, this is precisely the point of leaving work to the last minute. They're afraid that they're not as good as they've always imagined they were. By leaving work to the last minute, they never have to confront the reality of their abilities, so their untested assumptions about their academic potential can remain intact.

BREAKING FREE

- Set realistic, interim goals to provide some momentum for the project.
- Try out the strategies discussed in “Getting an Early Start” found in Coping with Multiple Deadlines.
- If possible, choose to work with a partner, and select one who functions on a more consistent work schedule. You will probably find it easier to adapt to his/her way of working than your partner will to the death by deadline approach. Some students simply cannot function in this way and working with one who insists on a more regular work pattern can help you ease into a different way of working.
- Experiment with new time planning approaches on small tasks that aren't worth a lot of marks and that don't require a lot of original thinking
- Often students in the death-by-deadline boat are those whose course work requires a lot of original or creative thinking. Rather than waiting for your muse to speak, learn to actively seek inspiration and good ideas. Professional writers and artists do some work every day, regardless of whether they feel inspired or not. To get a strong start, try strategies such as “Short Immersion Periods” found in Coping with Multiple Deadlines. Other methods to get the creative juices flowing are:
 - looking through professional books, journals and conference proceedings
 - attending professional conferences or exhibits
 - directed (not random) Web surfing
 - participating in relevant Internet discussion groups
 - creating an "idea file" containing both ideas for future projects & your own past projects
 - starting momentum on the project by allowing yourself to produce "garbage" (ie. notes, rough drafts, ideas, questions, directions, doodlings, etc.) as a way of creating momentum.

Sooner or later the death by deadline approach will catch up with just about every adherent to this risk-laden method of managing time. Wean yourself slowly from your dependence on deadlines and you are bound to discover more effective and less stressful ways to work productively and meet due dates.