

IS CHANGE POSSIBLE?

INTRODUCTION

If you've been struggling with time management issues for a while, it's unrealistic to think that work habits or attitudes forged over many years can be changed overnight. That being said, it is possible for just about anyone to change and improve the effectiveness of the way he/she is using and managing time. The hard part is that it takes patience (something many students don't have when they're rushed, stressed or overwhelmed), tenacity over the long haul, and an openness and willingness to change.



Keep in mind that if you can learn to manage time in the stressful, unstructured environment of a university, you can be confident of your ability to manage time in almost any situation after graduation.

Managing time effectively is a skill that takes time to acquire, to practise and to polish. One of the most common reasons students give up is that they assume that once a task list or a time plan has been created, that's it - they've managed their time. The hard part isn't making a list or a schedule - it's sticking to it. If your first efforts at planning don't work, don't give up. Some frustration is inevitable and even to be expected.

At first it may seem that you're actually getting less done than before because creating and monitoring a time plan is time-consuming and distracting. Two days before midterms is not the time to be trying out a new system of time management. It's best to start at the beginning of a semester, when the pressure and workload are at a minimum, so you can get the bugs ironed out of your time plan before the workload gets heavy. The trial and error approach of trying out strategies, seeing them fail, and then trying something else, are all essential parts of the process. If you can endure the first few weeks, later in the semester you'll reap the benefits when you need them the most.

HOW TO BEGIN

So, where do you begin? Start by evaluating the strategies you've been using up till now. Determine what has worked well and what hasn't. Awareness and understanding of why you work the way you do is the critical first step in initiating lasting change, but it isn't easy. Self-monitoring is essential; you must be your own watchdog. Time management is a skill that anyone can develop, but no skill can improve without accurate feedback, so setting aside a few minutes each day to review how your time plan is working is critical to making lasting changes. Whether tasks have been accomplished or not, figure out why:

- Have you simply over or underestimated how much can be done in a study session?
- Are you monitoring progress too much by interrupting your reading every few minutes to see how many pages are left before the end of the chapter?
- Have you allowed enough flexible time to accommodate your needs and lifestyle?

Your thoughtful analysis of the reasons why your time plan is working or not working is the key to the continuous improvement of your skills.

BE OPEN TO CHANGE

The way people manage their time is linked, to some extent, to their view of themselves - as people, as learners, as students. In order to enhance or improve the way you use time, you'll be learning new ideas and applying them, but there's more to it than that. Ultimately learning means that you will change.

Consider the way you think about students who use their time effectively. Do you truly admire them or deep down inside do you think of them as "control freaks"? The way you use time is a reflection of the type of person you are, so if you like to think of yourself as daring, a rebel, a risk taker, or someone who's great at pulling things off at the last minute, this self image may be in conflict with your image of someone who uses time effectively. This conflict could prove to be a major barrier to changing the way you do things.

To make really effective and lasting changes to the way you use time means that you need to accept that your view of yourself - your identity - will also change. It's important to examine any stereotypes you may have internalized about students who use time well, and decide if you really consider becoming an effective time manager to be a positive direction for personal change.

BE FLEXIBLE

Any time plan will be doomed if approached like it's written in stone. Students are subject to all the same diseases, disasters and distractions as the rest of the adult population, so cultivate the sensitivity to know when you're being productive and when you're beating your head against the wall, and take appropriate action. Don't stop writing your essay in the middle of a great idea because you only scheduled an hour for it. Learn effective procrastination - to recognize when putting a task off and doing something else is an intelligent, conscious decision and when it's just procrastinating.

BE STRATEGIC

In order to be successful at managing your time, it's also necessary to be strategic. This involves several steps:

- Plan - in this instance, how will you use your time?
- Monitor - is this working? Are you achieving what you planned to do? Are you enjoying this? How difficult is it?
- Analyze - why did or didn't this plan work? If it did work, you look at where or how else effective strategies can be used. If the plan didn't work, you develop new strategies and try them out.

BE AWARE

The common denominator of all these steps is awareness - of the importance of time management, of how you're using your time, of what works or is ineffective for you. The more aware you are of how other people use their time, the more quickly you will see and pick up new strategies. The bigger your repertoire of time management strategies, the easier it will be to adapt to new challenges, such as working around exams or a thesis, or the time management situations a full-time job, relationships, and children may bring. The moral here is keep your eyes open, listen when people talk about how time is used, and keep trying out new methods and techniques.

BE SKEPTICAL

It's not necessary to follow the advice given here to the letter - take this information and adapt it, change it, and modify it to suit your needs, your lifestyle, your program. Hopefully you'll find a few strategies here that you think are useful enough to try out. Because everyone is different, nothing will work for everybody, but some of the strategies will give you an idea, or help you develop something that will work for you.

BE PATIENT

Be gentle with yourself if you fall short of your expectations, but meanwhile keep a close eye on any negative patterns that emerge and try to determine their source. By expecting the unexpected and building flexibility into your time plan, you'll have a better chance of achieving your goals.

BE RESOURCEFUL

Last but not least, check out all the [resources](#) that are available at Guelph to help you develop your time management skills. Be sure to put your work with this website on your resume - the ability to manage time effectively is a very valuable asset to have in the working world.