

MAKING A TASK LIST

INTRODUCTION WHY MAKE A TASK LIST?

How you keep track of the work you have to do can have a great impact on how effectively you manage your time. Making a written list (called a "task list" or "to-do list") of everything that needs to get done is a simple, yet amazingly powerful, strategy. In fact, students who have attended our time management programs have consistently rated the task list as THE single most effective time planning tool.



One of the most useful aspects of task listing is that it provides a reality check for students at both ends of the spectrum of workload stress. A few students feel overwhelmed and stressed out because they overestimate how much work they have to do and the time needed to do it. Making a task list enables these students to get a realistic picture of their workload and helps them to realize it's more manageable than they assumed or imagined.

Task listing provides an equally important reality check for students who underestimate their workload and have a serious lack of awareness of how much work there really is to do. They habitually put things off with the assumption that they'll have time to do it "later," and as a result end up always being behind and handing work in late, or not at all.

Making a list of academic tasks on a regular basis provides several other benefits:

- You'll be less likely to forget even minor tasks
- You can determine which tasks have high priority and need to be done first, ensuring that deadlines will be met
- You'll have both a short- and long-range view of the work coming up
- You may procrastinate less when you have a realistic idea of how much work needs to be done

INTRODUCTION STEP 1: GET IT ALL DOWN

The first step is to write down all the academic tasks that need to be done in a specific period. For most students this is a simple extension of what they're already doing. Almost everyone has used a calendar of some sort to jot down due dates and tests. What makes a list more effective is making it regularly - usually once a week works well - and listing all school-related tasks, everything from readings, to working on assignments or labs, to starting big papers, to preparing for tests and exams. It helps to keep the list in the same safe spot - a special notebook, for example, or, if you buy a time planner, look for one that provides blank task lists. You can keep the list on your computer if you take it with you daily and can access it easily.

INTRODUCTION STEP 2: ESTIMATE

For each item on the list, large and small, estimate the amount of time you think it will take to complete it. At first you'll probably find this difficult, and your guesses may be way off. The key to getting the hang of this is to keep track of how much time each task actually took, and compare that to your estimate. With practice and monitoring, your accuracy will quickly increase.

Major assignments which span several weeks may pose a problem, but by breaking them down into steps, estimating becomes easier. An essay, for example, could break down like this:

- Choose preliminary topic and do bibliographic search to make sure enough information is available to do the paper.
- Have topic approved by instructor.
- Do research.
- Organize and categorize research material and create an outline.
- Write rough copy. Get input from faculty, TA, writing and/or learning services consultant.
- Revise rough copy.
- Do references and footnotes.
- Print good copy.

Estimate how long each step will take and total the estimations. Then add a safety margin to the total. This "sanity zone" allows for all the unexpected things that can happen over the course of several weeks - everything from getting sick to not finding a book you need in the library. 50% over the initial estimate is a good rule of thumb if you don't have much experience with the particular type of assignment. The more experience you have, the less of a safety margin you'll need.

Next, divide the total (estimation plus safety margin) by the number of weeks you have to do the assignment. For example:

Estimated time for assignment: 10 hours + 50% (sanity zone) = 15

15 hours divided by 5 weeks to do assignment = 3 hours per week

You would then put approximately 3 hours for this assignment on your task list each week for the next five weeks. If you need to compromise a few hours somewhere, assignment time is usually a safe choice if the due date is far enough away.

Although at first it may be just wild guessing, estimating how long study tasks will take is probably the only way of getting a true picture of how much work you really have to do - hence the reality check. For this to work effectively, however, it's critical to be realistic about the amount of time the work will take. Students sometimes fall into the trap of estimating how much time they think a task should take, or how much time they'd like it to take, rather than how much time it will really take to do it well.

It's also not uncommon for the time designated for a task to shrink to fit the time available, with the result that important assignments may end up getting only a minimum of effort. Once in a while this might be unavoidable, but it should be the exception rather than the rule. If you find yourself regularly compromising on important assignments and doing the minimum rather than your best work, you may need to spend more time on step three...

INTRODUCTION STEP 3: PRIORITIZE

The next step is to prioritize - decide which tasks are most important to do first and number them in order. Everyone has particular criteria for making these decisions - marks, due dates, required subjects and majors usually figure prominently when priorities are set.

Sometimes during the semester (particularly if you've been procrastinating) there will be more items on the list than can be realistically completed in a week. If time is tight you can often postpone low priority items.

Prioritizing forces you to weigh the importance of each item on the list and make conscious, intelligent decisions about what to do first, what to do later, or what not to do.

LISTING OTHER TASKS

Some students also like to keep a list of other activities in their lives, like appointments, household chores or social events. Others find that they don't need a list for non-academic activities because they put them directly into a planning book or calendar.

It helps when deciding on priorities to have an overview of both study tasks and other activities. Most of the time, if you're being consistent and strategic, you can plan studying around other activities.

The task list is used in conjunction with the Master Time Plan and your preferred level of structure to create a time plan that works effectively for you.