

Procrastination

Introduction

Procrastination is probably the single most common time management problem. Everyone procrastinates to some extent; however, there are several reasons why university students rank highly among those most vulnerable to procrastination:

1. There is always a tremendous amount of work to do. Regardless of how much time you spend studying, it can seem impossible to get "finished."
2. For most students, only a small number of hours each day are spent in classes and labs. The majority of time is unstructured, and you're responsible for deciding what to do and when to do it.
3. In the university environment, particularly in residence, there is usually something more enjoyable to do than studying. Many activities compete for a limited number of hours in a week; studying is often pushed to the bottom of the list.
4. Procrastination is common among high-achieving and high-ability students because of its connection to perfectionism.

Given these conditions, it's not hard to understand why procrastination is such a common problem for university students. Learning some strategies to control procrastination can help make getting started less painful and reduce getting behind. Good time management doesn't necessarily mean working harder or working more - it means working smarter. Here's how.

Strategy 1: Realistic Goal Setting

One common reason for procrastinating is that often too much of the same activity must be done at one sitting. Rather than spending three hours in one evening reading fifty pages for Psychology, plan to read for one hour each day over three days. This is especially important for subjects who are difficult or unpleasant. If you spend thirty to sixty minutes each day, rather than leaving a week's work for one marathon session, you'll be far less likely to put the work off.

Strategy 2: Plan to Work, Plan to Play

In the section above we've used the term "plan" - something which is usually missing from the procrastinator's vocabulary. If you use the "I do whatever I feel like doing whenever I feel like doing it" method of time management, this scenario is probably familiar to you: you can't work effectively because your mind is on the other things you'd rather be doing, yet you feel guilty when you're not working because there's so much waiting to be done.

Although there is something to be said for waiting for inspiration to strike, it is usually not a very efficient way to get things done. Planning does not mean rigid or elaborate scheduling, but it does require some skill and intelligent decision making. A good time plan is probably the single most effective way to control procrastination. For information about time planning, see the Study Skills Tip Sheet entitled *Effective Time Planning Strategies*.

Strategy 3: The "Making a Molehill out of a Mountain" Method

Procrastination often results when the task seems difficult, unpleasant, or overpowering. You can bring the task down to size and make it less intimidating by using this method. As soon as you receive a big assignment, set aside a mere 10 or 15 minutes a day to work on it. By the end of one week, you'll have spent at least an hour on the task, and you may have found that it's not quite as scary as you thought. By spending only a few minutes each day, you are accomplishing a small, and therefore less intimidating, task - one that is less likely to get put off. Once you are involved and maybe even interested in the task, you may be motivated to spend more time on it. Be cautious, however, since very large tasks such as a thesis require larger blocks of time. Manageable, daily periods of work are the key, while starting early helps to ensure that due dates will be met.

Strategy 4: Self Discipline?

Students often blame their problems with procrastination on laziness or a lack of self discipline. However, the cause is usually not as simple as that. For example, there is an interesting connection between procrastination and perfectionism. Students for who nothing less than an A will do may procrastinate on an assignment so that when their mark is not up to their standard, they can blame it on the fact that they did the assignment in a hurry. They create an emotional "out" - the low mark does not reflect their true ability, so there is no loss of self esteem.

Procrastination can sometimes be an indication of a fear of failure, or of disappointing family. Sometimes it is a symptom of a lack of motivation, the loss of a sense of purpose for being at university. In fact, there are many reasons why students procrastinate. The strategies in this Study Skills Tip Sheet can help with procrastination temporarily, but understanding why you procrastinate is essential for its long-term management. You can explore the connection between procrastination and other issues in more detail by setting up an appointment with a Counsellor in Student Services.

Want more information?

The Counselling Department and the Academic Success Centre are your best sources for advice and information on issues related to learning, studying, time management, and academic performance.

Workshops on learning, studying, etc., are offered regularly each semester by the Counselling Department. Please contact Student Services at Abbotsford - 604-854-4528 (B 214) or Chilliwack - 604-795-2808 (A 1318) to make an appointment.

Study Skills Tip Sheets providing information on many learning and time management topics, as well as writing and referencing, are available free to students. The complete range of Study Skills Tip Sheets is available on-line at www.ufv.ca/counselling/study/.

Links to Resources Elsewhere:

A section, "Procrastination", from the online book "Psychological Self-Help" by C.E. Tucker-Ladd:

www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=9770&cn=353

The University of Buffalo's "Overcoming Procrastination": <http://www.student-affairs.buffalo.edu/shs/ccenter/stressprocrast.php>

T. Quek's "The Problem of Procrastination":

webhome.idirect.com/~readon/procrast

The ToDo Institute's approach to "Procrastination and Getting Things Done", based on Eastern traditions of health and healing:

www.todoinstitute.com/

Other Relevant Study Skills Tip Sheets:

Making a Tasklist

Effective Planning Strategies

Making Time Management Work for You

With thanks to the University of Guelph
Learning Services
The Learning Commons