

Making a Task List

Introduction

One of the basics of effective time management is to be aware of all that needs to be done. Though many people keep track of day-to-day activities in their heads, effective time managers facilitate planning and productivity by making a task list. If you develop the skill of listing tasks regularly, you'll benefit in several ways:

- You will be less likely to forget even minor tasks.
- You may procrastinate less when you have a realistic idea of the work that needs to be done, and the time available to do it.
- You'll have more flexibility when deciding what to do and when to do it because you determine which tasks have high priority.
- You'll have both a short- and long-range view of the work coming up.

Step 1: List

The first step is to write down all the study related tasks that need to be done. For most students this is just an extension of what they're already doing. Almost everyone uses a calendar of some sort to jot down due dates and tests. The key differences are that you do it regularly - usually once a week works well - and that all the study tasks you have, everything from day-to-day readings to working on labs or major assignments, are put on the list.

Step 2: Estimate

This second step is critical, but very few people do it. For each task on the list, estimate the amount of time it will take you to complete it. At first you may find this difficult, and your guesses may be way off. With practice, however, your accuracy will quickly increase. Major assignments which span several weeks may pose a problem, but by breaking the assignment down into steps, estimating becomes much easier. An essay, for example, could break down like this:

1. Choose preliminary topic and have it approved by instructor.

2. Do bibliographic search to make sure enough information is available on topic.
3. Finalize topic and do research.
4. Organize and categorize research material and create an outline.
5. Write rough copy.
6. Get feedback on rough copy and revise.
7. Edit, polish, and print good copy.
8. Do references and footnotes.

Estimate how long each step will take, and then total the estimations. Next, 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 your getting sick to not finding a book you need in the library. Fifty percent over the initial estimate is commonly used, but the more experience you have, the less safety margin you'll need.

Divide the new total by the number of weeks you have to do the assignment. For example:

Estimated time for assignment: 10 hours x 1.5 (sanity zone) = 15

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

You would then put 3 hours for this assignment on your task list for each of 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 wild guessing, estimating how long study tasks will take is one of the few ways of getting a realistic picture of how much work you really have to do.

Step 3: Prioritize

The next step is to prioritize - decide what tasks are most important to do first and number them in rank order. Everyone has his or her own 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 delegate certain tasks (such as word processing) or postpone low priority items. Prioritizing forces you to weigh the importance of each item on the task list, and to make a conscious, thoughtful decision about what to do when.

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/.

Other Relevant Study Skills Tip Sheets:

Controlling Procrastination
Effective Time Planning Strategies
Making Time Management Work for You

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