
Academic Advising

PROCRASTINATION

Procrastination is a common problem and not just for students! We procrastinate for many different reasons, several of which are outlined below, along with some advice on how to combat our urge to procrastinate. While there is something to be said for the adrenaline-induced focus we can exhibit when we're under pressure, waiting until the last minute is a strategy that will undoubtedly backfire most of the time, especially since most college-level work is not designed to be completed in a small amount of time. Procrastination is a habit and it is best overcome by learning to recognize our tendency to procrastinate and by making a conscious effort to change our pattern of behaviour.

Lack of motivation

It is understandable and okay that you aren't motivated to do all your work all the time; no one is. What's not okay, however, is using a lack of motivation to procrastinate doing the task until you "feel like it". Instead, accept that there are tasks you will have to complete even if you don't enjoy them or feel like doing them; this approach will take you much further than waiting to "become" motivated. Remember that:

- getting started is often the most difficult part of completing a task; don't underestimate the effect of small steps in gaining motivation (simply putting yourself in the physical space where you intend to complete the task can be very helpful)
- often, once we've taken the first few small steps, the motivated to progress comes easily
- it is usually more effective to attempt to complete a task in short intervals (e.g. 30 minutes at a time), taking a short time between each interval, than it is to try to work for several hours without a break
- if you begin an assignment or you start studying for an exam well ahead of time, the payoff is that you will experience less stress, you will do a better job and you will have the time to seek clarification or feedback if you reach a stumbling block.

Focus on instant gratification

Another reason we tend to procrastinate is that when we don't see the rewards of our efforts immediately (instant gratification), we aren't motivated to complete the work. It is important to understand that sometimes the gratification only comes much later (delayed gratification), once you've put in a significant amount of work over a long period of time. So, instead of craving instant gratification, focus on the longer-term benefits of completing the task. Here are some examples:

- you will gain a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment from having done it well
- you will probably achieve a higher grade on the work if you complete it early and devote enough time to it, rather than rushing to complete it at the last minute
- you will rid yourself of the feeling of having something hanging over your head
- you will be able to do an activity you enjoy, guilt-free, once you're finished the task
- you learn more from the task if you've given sufficient time and energy to completing it, rather than having to rush to complete it
- you will be one step closer to your long-term academic and career goals

Lack of information

What happens if your teacher assigns you a research paper, but you have no idea where to begin and you're not even sure you understand the assignment? When you're not sure how to complete a task, putting it off can seem like a very attractive option! But remember that simply waiting for the missing information to come to you is a bad plan. Instead, take charge:

- identify the information you're lacking: are you unsure what your teacher wants? do you not understand the material well enough?
- identify the people or tools who can help you obtain that information: can you speak to your teacher? can you consult a classmate? can you look up the information yourself?
- obtain the information you need so that you can move ahead; the longer we wait to get started, the more daunting the task seems.

Size of the task

Big tasks are often the ones we procrastinate with the most, often because we're not sure where to start or because we feel overwhelmed by the size of the task at hand. And yet, these are the tasks that will ultimately require us to spend the most time to complete! The best tactic to take is to break down the large task into as many small tasks as possible; you'll often find that tackling a series of small tasks seems much more manageable than the idea of completing the whole task at once.

Let's take the example of studying for a final exam. Here are some ways you can break down the large task into smaller tasks:

- first, gather all your materials; if you prefer to study from paper rather than from a computer screen, be sure to print out all the material before you begin to study in earnest
- make sure you're aware of what material you're responsible for, then break down the information into segments in a way that makes sense to you and in light of the course (e.g. by chapter, by week, by topic, etc.); if some segments are much larger than others, break them down into smaller ones
- break up the types of studying that you can do for each segment (e.g. recopying/reorganizing your class notes; taking notes from the textbook; re-reading highlighted sections; reviewing PowerPoint presentations; completing quizzes or old exams)
- identify blocks of time in your schedule that you will use to study for the exam and set up a study schedule for yourself: using your broken-down segments, write down exactly what material you will study during each of those blocks; be sure to allow yourself more time for material you find more difficult.

Perfectionism

Sometimes we procrastinate because we want our work to be "perfect" and don't want to get started until we feel we are absolutely ready to make it flawless. It's important to accept that there is no such thing as the "perfect paper" or the "perfect presentation"; in reality, we are certainly more likely to do a better job the more time and effort we devote to a project.

In some cases, perfectionism can become debilitating and can prevent even extremely talented and hard-working students from achieving success. If you feel that perfectionist tendencies are significantly impacting your life, schedule a meeting with a Counsellor to discuss strategies that can help you combat the urge toward perfectionism.

Feeling uncomfortable with the task

Sometimes we know the task needs to get done and we know how to go about it, but something about the task makes us nervous or anxious and so we put it off. For example, you might avoid getting started on a paper because the topic is something that makes you uneasy. In this scenario, it is important to recognize that:

- we often imagine things turning out much worse than they actually do
- the anxiety caused by putting off the task is making the situation worse than it really is
- putting off a task will not make it any easier to complete in the long run; in fact, having to rush at the last minute and worry about not being able to finish the task usually makes the experience even less appealing than it was in the first place.

Being distracted

It's easy to put off studying when there are other things competing for your attention. Instead, create an environment in which you can't help but complete the task by removing any distractions from your work environment:

- use noise-cancelling headphones if necessary
- disable internet access on your computer and turn off your phone so that you're not distracted by incoming messages, emails, etc.
- make sure you're comfortable: not too hot, too cold, hungry, etc.
- have all your material with you (computer, books, notes, handouts, assignments, pencils, calculator, etc.) so that you don't have to pause to find any of these items
- stay away from people you find distracting while you're studying
- if your usual study space is full of distractions, consider other options, such as the College library, a municipal library, or a café