



McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning

Principles of Effective Time Management for Balance, Well-being, and Success

The principles below are derived from research on time management, motivation theory and much experience working with university students. Think of time management techniques as tools to help you do what you value the most. Make these tools into an expression of your values—what’s most important to you—not just a schedule to get more stuff done. Try to keep these principles in mind as you schedule and calendar your time, and when making the moment-to-moment decisions that are crucial to effective time management for balance and well-being.

1. **Commitment**—if you can’t commit to devoting time to a task, don’t put it in your schedule. Only schedule tasks you **WILL** do. Be brutally realistic, not idealistic when making your schedule. Creating a schedule you can’t actually keep is setting yourself up for frustration. If you don’t actually stick to your schedule it will soon become useless. This may have happened to you in the past.
2. **Pursue fun with a vengeance**—Make time for enjoyable, rejuvenating and satisfying activities like organizations, sports, and entertainment. Organize your academic and other obligations **AROUND** these commitments to fun.
3. **Time vs. task focus**—Think of your day in terms of time, not the tasks you have to do. Devote time to important tasks every day. It’s hard to predict how long a task will take, so it’s hard to schedule with great precision. But you can reliably schedule regular intervals of time and get into a routine. Make an appointment with yourself for a particular time period, and when playing or working, set your purpose “I’ll get the most out of this time.”

4. **One thing at a time**—Current research shows us that multi--tasking is a myth. In actuality, we are switching back and forth between tasks. With each switch we pay a cognitive cost and a time cost: It takes time to get mentally back into the task, thus making us less efficient. When switching we lose the depth of our engagement, absorption. This depth is necessary at Princeton where you are expected to gain conceptual mastery, not merely a superficial understanding.
5. **Block out time**—devote, on a regular basis, chunks of time to a specific class. Make it part of your schedule, your routine. Estimate how many hours per week you want to devote to a class. Set aside this many hours for working tasks in the course Slice up your task into pieces and allow specific blocks of time for specific pieces of a big project.
6. **First Things First**—if you can do so, schedule the things that are most important to you first thing in the day, or at the first available time slot. Anything that gets scheduled later in the day has a greater chance of getting interrupted, put off and never gotten to. You won't be thinking or worrying about your work during your leisure time if you get academic tasks done first.
7. **Routine**—It takes 30 days to create a habit, but good habits make your life easier. With good habits in place you don't have to make as many hard decisions, thus you are less likely to make unproductive ones such as talking yourself out of doing what you had planned.
8. **Flexibility**—How do you incorporate flexibility into your schedule? Don't schedule every hour of the day, leave empty time slots, and schedule in recreation time. Create a two-hour or three-hour block on Friday as a catch all makeup time. When things come up and you are deciding whether to diverge from your established schedule, survey future hours and days to see where you can make up lost time. Switch blocks of time so that your schedule reflects your new commitments.
9. **Respond vs. react**—In the moment of decision--making, when faced with a decision or an impulse to diverge from your schedule, don't just react, RESPOND. Pause, take a moment to think. Remember what's most important to you and do what will help you get it. For example, if exercise is a top priority for you, don't let a sudden fear about a grade prevent you from exercising. Be ready to reduce the amount of time, but don't compromise on your health. Don't let "mindgames" in which you create justifications get in the way or lead you astray.

10. **Organize your environment**—both physical and social—for success, for support—be creative.

- a. Choose carefully where you study and do other tasks: minimize distraction; maximize focus.
 - b. Use physical reminders. If you want to work out more, but are getting bogged down in email or Facebook, put your running shoes on top of your laptop. Make it harder to get off track and easier to stick to your plan by changing your environment.
 - c. Instead of friends being a “distraction”, enlist their support:
 - i. Study buddy/group—work on problem sets, readings, etc. in your shared course together.
 - ii. Get a study/writing partner—same place and time, but not the same course.
 - iii. Ask friends NOT to call you at specific times. Ask them to help you stick to your schedule. Say, “tell me to leave your room” or the dining hall after one hour, etc.
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