

Thinking about planning work and effective time management

The Institute for the Advancement of University Learning suggests to research students that they divide up their research time into periods of **divergence** and **convergence**. This advice is good for undergraduate and Masters' study too. Divergence is when you explore, investigate, follow your nose, go on wild goose chases, change your mind frequently and change your plans. Convergence is when you summarise, make decisions, draw conclusions, write things up, and present drafts to your supervisor or tutor for evaluation and feedback. Dividing your mountain of work into stages of divergence and stages of convergence might help you balance the attraction of unfettered exploration with the need to write up as you go along. Yet neither of these activities should be used inappropriately as an avoidance tactic. Try to make sure you are choosing the appropriate activity for the right stage in your work.

How can you deal with feelings of being overwhelmed by a large and difficult project with many unknowable aspects?

As well as your long term goals to get a good degree or to shape and complete your research, set medium – term and daily tasks.

Medium-term Tasks

Once you and your tutor or supervisor have established your longer-term plans and goals, you will need to break down these goals into shorter tasks for each week, month or term. These tasks become the 'stairs' that allow you to approach each part of your work as an achievable, non-intimidating activity. Writing down these tasks in your journal, or marking them off on a calendar or diary, will allow you to feel in control of your work. Instead of drifting from book to book, working through a series of tasks will focus your efforts productively and effectively. Successful goals are often constructed using the 'SMART' formula. Goals should be:

- Specific: detailed enough that you know exactly what you are going to do
- Measurable: they should be tangible with some concrete evidence of completion (i.e. not 'study Adam Smith' but 'read X, Y and Z and make notes/write summaries')
- Attainable or achievable: something that is feasible given the time and resources available. If it is too optimistic, you will struggle to complete it and become discouraged
- Relevant and realistic: you need to be clear about how this goal will advance your project as a whole
- Time-specific: you need to set realistic deadlines for your goal

Suggestions for how to construct realistic and achievable tasks:

- tasks should contain a verb or a command (e.g. read, write, summarise, investigate) rather than just describing an area for research (e.g. Milton, biography)
- try to use verbs which define exactly what you have to do
- set triggers for action (e.g. say when you are going to begin a task)
- think about what sort of tasks would best suit you
- think about how big or small a task would best suit you

- break difficult tasks into smaller ‘subtasks’
- establish a deadline for each task
- tell a friend or a relative what you are planning and ask them to monitor your progress informally
- organise yourself a ‘study buddy’, a fellow student with whom you reciprocally exchange plans and monitor each others progress
- remember to be flexible: circumstances may change and you may need to reevaluate and adjust the task and/or its deadline

Being goal-oriented but task-focused will help you balance longer-term plans with week-to-week progress. Each task that is completed takes you one small but decisive step closer to completion. Staying goal-oriented means thinking about how each task takes you closer to your ultimate goal, and altering your medium-term goals if necessary. But it doesn’t matter if you take steps or complete tasks that don’t fit in perfectly at first. Progress towards your goal doesn’t necessarily have to be linear.

Day-to-day Time Management

People procrastinate (from the Latin for ‘to put off till tomorrow’) for a variety of reasons:

- Lack of time management skills, lack of experience of self-management
- Underestimating the task required
- Lack of interest in the task
- Aversion to discomfort: once you get used to putting things off, it’s hard to break through the ‘pain’ barrier
- Anxiety about failing, about not being good enough, feeling overwhelmed
- Difficulty in concentrating because of personal problems
- Positive procrastination: needing more thinking time, not wanting to act preemptively or presumptuously

Effective Time Management

Practical Suggestions for Time Management

- Take control: buy a diary or a week-by-week planner. Write down deadlines and fixed commitments.
- Decide how much research or study you want to do each week and each day. It is all too easy to feel as if you should work every hour of the day and night. But in order to sustain your energy and your focus over the length of your degree you will need to divide your time into work and leisure. Don’t be too ambitious: working twelve-hour days is likely to be unsustainable in the long term.
- The 80/20 principle of time management suggests that 80% of your really productive and creative work will be done in 20% of your time. It might be more productive to work solidly and effectively for five or six hours a day and then rest and relax, rather than hang out in the library from dawn till dusk. Schedule in coffee breaks and meal breaks, but make sure your work time is as free from interruption and distraction as possible.

- Plan blocks of study with breaks in between. Decide what length of time suits you best. Spacing out your study with breaks in between is usually more efficient than attempting to work for four or five hours without a break.
- Break down big tasks into smaller, more easily achievable tasks.
- Be flexible and be prepared for plans to change: don't make your schedule so crowded that you can't cope with delays or distractions.
- Work with your biological clock. When do you work best? Schedule your most important tasks for those hours. Save filing/photocopying/trawling bibliographies and databases for the times at which you work less well.
- Review your plans and plan ahead every few days. Deciding on your hours of work and monitoring your hours can help you prevent guilt and stress. Once you have completed your target hours, you can enjoy your time off. If you struggle to meet your target one day, you can work out how to catch up calmly.
- Keep a daily 'to-do' list listing what must be done today, what should be done today and what might be done today.
- Try 'batching' to avoid distractions: set aside a period of time each day to read and write emails, surf the web, check your phone, deal with post and paperwork. Don't let yourself be continually interrupted.