Time Management for Graduate Students

Academics around the world face a similar problem: time management. The result of looming publication deadlines, lofty research goals, or lingering projects, the anxiety that accompanies poor time management can be paralyzing. Managing time, organizing research, and producing text can be difficult, particularly when you have too much (time, research, or text) or too little. The pace of study changes considerably upon entry to graduate school; the papers and the deadlines are longer. You may begin work at a leisurely pace, but within weeks of the first deadline, it will become evident that you require planning, priorities, and productive routines.

This publication will outline how you can effectively manage and organize your time, while balancing research, writing, and teaching responsibilities. You will find strategies and tools for long-term and short-term planning, all devised from working with graduate students like you. Beyond practical planning suggestions, we discuss procrastination and motivation, and we offer advice to help you build momentum in your writing – often the biggest hurdle for graduate students.

The Fundamentals of Time Management

Perhaps the concept of time management is problematic for you; it might connote a misperception that humans can control time. Or perhaps you believe that any management of your writing or research project may stifle your creative or analytical ability. However, time management is necessary for academics because it allows them to define and achieve goals, to establish a balance in their multiple roles, and to ease the anxiety often associated with unclear direction, undefined goals, and lack of balance.

Keys to Time Management

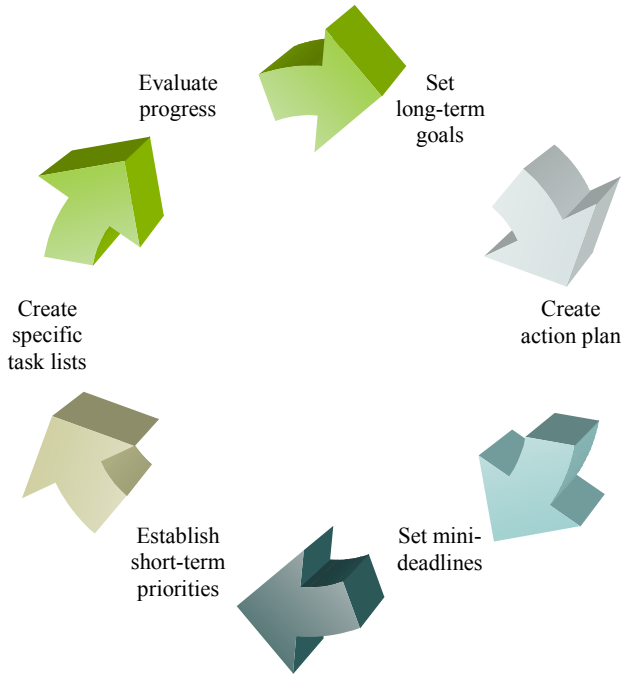
1. Build productive routines: Most productive scholars will tell you that they have set times and routines for their work. Some write every morning for several hours. Others set aside certain days of the week for their research. If you establish fixed times for tasks, you are less likely to double-book or to shirk a responsibility. So, just as you call your sister every Thursday or walk the dog at noon everyday, set times for the lab, the library, or lecture prep at a regular time and day. Where you can, make your routines work with your natural rhythms: if you are a morning person, you might set time for writing from 7-9 am every day. Scheduling work that is frustrating or tedious for the afternoon, when you are hitting a daytime lull, will make it difficult; instead think about active tasks that may keep you going, like field work or marking papers.

2. Use time for **one** purpose so that you can focus on that purpose: How often do you stray from an online article or your paragraph that goes nowhere to your email, YouTube, or cbc.ca? Email can take up considerable time and energy; schedule time to deal with email, read the news or skim your Facebook newsfeed that is separate from your times for writing or research. When it is time to write, research, or sort data, do only that task. Leave associated tasks or complete time-wasters for later. Some students use free software to disable their internet access while they write;

others set up separate accounts on their computers – one for work, one for personal.

3. Be honest with yourself. Unsuccessful time management plans are built on unrealistic expectations and broken promises. If you do not normally write ten pages in a day or create five tables in an afternoon, do not build your entire project plan around these expectations. Be sure to build in time for planning, reviewing, and re-organizing. When setting goals, be specific and realistic; consider all of the tasks that will go into writing a chapter or preparing to teach a lab.

4. Plan for now and later. Develop a time management plan that establishes a regular schedule within the context of long-term goals and commitments. Survey the "big picture" of your work: identify problem periods, see the cycles in your work, and begin to budget your time. Then, assess priorities and create a weekly schedule to accomplish specific goals.



Long-term Planning: Managing your Roles

Each role you take on in your academic life has its own duties and responsibilities; it is important to recognize these in advance and plan for the inevitable feast or famine in your workload.

The Teacher requires time for preparation, meetings, emails, marking, and class. The teaching patterns are generally established around marking, so it is essential that you note major due dates for assignments on your long-term calendar, and plan for time before and after these dates for additional office hours, increased emails, instructor meetings, and marking.

The Student requires time for courses and course work – readings, reviews, presentations, and later for preparing for comprehensive exams. Make sure to note assignment dues dates on your long-term calendar. Then, set target dates to complete the tasks necessary for each assignment.

The Researcher requires time to collect data or samples, to run programs and complete calculations, to review literature, and to find a way to fund the next project.

- List all of the major grant and funding opportunities that you would like to apply for and mark their deadlines in your calendar (the same one you used for teaching).
- With consideration for the overall goal of your major research project, masters' thesis or doctoral dissertation, list the major tasks or topics for your research. Establish timelines for research ethics approval, collecting raw data, gathering samples, visits to out-of-town archives and libraries. Consider schedules you cannot control such as shared equipment or faculty feedback. ***The***

Writer (or, if you prefer, ***Reporter***) requires time to analyse, interpret, and articulate the findings from research. This is often where graduate students struggle as the long-term goal can seem to be big and nebulous; it may seem overwhelming, particularly in the face of more immediate and specific concerns that arise in teaching and research. It is important to set smaller goals and meet mini-deadlines; mark your mini-deadlines on your calendar.

FALL TERM 2011						
Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28 Marking	29	30	O – 1
2	3	4	5	6 Ethics Proposal	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25 Robards	26	27	28	29
30	31	N – 1	2 Marking	3	4	5
6	7 1st review	8	9	10 Robards	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18 Grant Proposal	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	D – 1	2 Thesis proposal	3
4	5 2nd Review	6	7	8	9	10

Long Term Planning for Your Thesis

The Outline as a Time Management Tool: The outline is an important tool for organizing your ideas in writing; however, it can also help you to be more efficient in your project management. Assess the "big picture" of your work, noting the main ideas or arguments, types of evidence you will use, and the general structure required by your discipline; the outline offers direction for long-term planning and identifies the specific tasks required to meet long-term goals.

Focusing on the purpose of your work and the questions you wish to answer can help you to:

- Stay on track
- Set achievable goals
- Find motivation to work towards a larger goal

Use your outline to make and achieve specific and attainable goals. Use the ASC worksheet on our website.

1. Set Goals: Break your thesis down into small, manageable goals. What do you want to accomplish? What do you need to do? A goal like "complete literature review" is too general; instead break down the concepts or significant findings you will explore in the review.

2. Make a Plan: By which dates do you want to accomplish your smaller goals? Put these dates on your calendar. For your short-term planning, you will establish a task list (framed by your working outline) for each goal.

3. Create check points and strategies for review: How much work do you need to put in each week to meet these deadlines? Is your mini-deadline achievable?

Short Term Planning

Creating a Generic Weekly Schedule

- Create a master weekly schedule where you block off all of your teaching, research, and personal commitments.

- Block off time for weekly academic work commitments.

- Block off time for long term goals.

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
7am	Bike			Bike		Bike	
8am		Course Work		Prep/ Marking 1020H		Course Work	
9am			Sem - 5140		Sem – 1020H		Prep/ Marking 1020H
10am					Sem – 1020H		
11am					Office Hours		
12pm							
1pm	Course Work	Thesis Work	Thesis Work	Thesis Work	Thesis Work	Thesis Work	
2pm							
3pm							
4pm	Wkly Plan						
5pm				Lec – 1020H		Soccer	
6pm			Yoga		Yoga		
7pm		Thesis Group					
8pm							

Creating Weekly Priorities and To-Do Lists

•Examine your long term calendars to determine what you need to accomplish in the week ahead.

•What are your priorities? What needs to get done?

•Make a tentative plan for WHEN you will accomplish these things.

Daily Agenda Entries

This week's priorities: Writing Chapter 2 – complete 12 pages – establish theoretical background, synthesize key contributors Marking Proposals – return to students next Monday Seth's birthday – Tuesday	
Monday Jan 17	Tuesday Jan 18
Morning Review & revise Chapter 2 outline – develop details: what def'ns missing? (2-3 hrs) Afternoon –Tutorial 1-3pm –Citations for Chp 2 •Evening •Write 3pgs – Chp 2	•Morning –Write 3-5 pgs – Chp 2 •Afternoon –Marking Proposals (3-4 hrs) •Evening –Seth's birthday – Gerti's

Understanding and Avoiding Procrastination

The Procrastination Problem

Most of us engage in procrastination activities, such as checking Facebook, taking long coffee breaks, or even finding hidden corners of our houses to clean. Often, these activities provide a short break from which we eventually redirect ourselves and get back to work.

However, for some, procrastination can become a problem that causes anxiety and inhibits progress. Indeed, procrastination has been defined as "willingly deferring something even though you expect the delay to make you worse off…. The essence of procrastination lies in not doing what you think you should be doing" (Piers Steel as cited in Surowiecki, 2010). Thus, many of us know that, by procrastinating, we are actually hurting ourselves, and this can cause depression and anxiety. One researcher points out that "the perplexing thing about procrastination" is that "although it seems to involve avoiding unpleasant tasks, indulging in it generally doesn't make people happy" (Surowiecki, 2010).

Why Do People Procrastinate?

• People tend to procrastinate when they feel overwhelmed by a task or don't know how to begin working on it.

•People often allow themselves to believe that they have more time than they really do to complete a project. They ignore the realities of the demands on their time and the likelihood that something might "come up" and pretend to themselves that there will be a time in the future when they will be able to work without distractions and, thus, become far more productive than they usually are. Not surprisingly, this mythical time rarely, if ever, comes to pass.

•People engage in perfectionism and self-handicapping. They fear beginning a project because they believe that their work will not live up to expectations.

Strategies for Avoiding Procrastination

- Break large, vague projects down into **clear, concrete tasks**. Research shows that people are far more likely to procrastinate when work is vague or abstract. So, instead of planning to "write a book review" on a given day, break down the tasks involved with writing the review (reading/notetaking, outlining, drafting, and revising) and plan to complete them one at a time.

- Consider ways to "trick" yourself into completing work before it is due. Create false deadlines or make a commitment with a colleague or your advisor to have a draft done by an advanced date.

- Turn off social media while you are working. Only let yourself check email, Facebook, or Twitter at set times during the day. There are even software programs that will shut down your internet access during certain time of the day.

- Build momentum. If you procrastinate because you fear the terror of the blank page, find ways to start writing that are less formal. Free write, write an outline with details, write a letter to a friend explaining your work, write a review of your unwritten thesis, or write a summary of a source. Just start writing, and momentum will generally build.

- Stop reading and start writing. The old joke is that for graduate students, there is always just one last book to read before they can begin writing their thesis. There will always be one more source; but consider what will it add that can't be added later, after you have begun writing. Develop parameters and cut-off dates for your research; at some point, you need to stop reading and start writing.