

Time Management Techniques

While it is important to develop your own style for managing your time and work, consider how the following techniques might help you.

First, stack the cards in your favor. For example:

- **Use your biological rhythms to your advantage.** Identify the times of day when your energy levels are at their highest and do your most important work at those times. For example, if you work best in the morning, do not plan all your studying for the evening.
- **Optimize your work environment.** Keep things you need in your work area and make sure the physical environment is conducive to concentration, not just comfort. You may need to experiment to determine the right work environment. For example, some work best in a quiet setting while others work best with background music; some work best amidst clutter, while others need a cleared desk or table; some work best at a place reserved only for study while others work best at the kitchen table; etc. Find what works best for you!
- **Safeguard blocks of work time.** Protect your time by saying “no” to various interruptions, activities, requests, or persons. Interruptions are a two-fold problem: the interruption itself, and the expectation of further interruptions. Both reduce your effectiveness considerably. Some interruptions can be avoided by keeping in mind the following:
 - **Arrange your work area** so that your back is to the traffic flow.
 - **Close your door;** open it selectively.
 - **Find and use a special space** such as a library carrel or an office where friends will be unable to find you.
 - **Unplug your phone,** or install an answering machine. Return telephone calls when it is more convenient for you, perhaps when you take a study break.

Second, prioritize the things you wish to do:

STEP 1: Develop an overview of everything that you want to accomplish. Start by determining the time frame you’d like to work with (a semester, a month, a week, a day?). Five goals for the week, for example, might include studying for an exam on Friday, spending more time with a friend you’ve been neglecting, exercising three times for half an hour each time, attending Wednesday’s clothing sale, and watching a few “soaps.” Notice that the goals include not only academic responsibilities but also personal and social activities. Write each of your goals on a separate index card.

STEP 2: Organize your goals according to their priority. Stephen Covey (1989) suggests using the following Table and thinking of priorities in terms of two dimensions, urgency and importance. First, determine how urgent each of the goals is and separate your index cards into urgent and non-urgent piles. From our examples, studying for the exam and attending the clothing sale may be more urgent than socializing or exercising because they have deadlines coming up soon.

Next separate the pile of urgent items into important and non-important items, and similarly the pile of non-urgent items into important and non-important items. Then refer to the Table below. From our examples, studying for the exam may be both urgent and important and would fall under Quadrant I in our Table. Attending the sale may end up in Quadrant III—i.e., urgent and non-important. Of the three non-urgent goals, let’s say socializing with the friend and exercising feel important; they would fall into Quadrant II.

Finally, if you considered watching the “soaps” to be both non-urgent and non-important, that activity would fall into Quadrant IV.

		Urgency	
		High	Low
Importance	High	I	II
	Low	III	IV

By placing your goals in each of these quadrants, you can get a better sense of how to prioritize, and thus how to distribute your time and energy. Obviously, Quadrant I goals go high on the list. Less obvious, however, poor time managers give too little time and energy to Quadrant II activities (e.g., the research paper which is due “later!”) and/or too much time and energy to Quadrant III & Quadrant IV activities. **An additional hint for Step 2:** While you may find it easy to distinguish between urgent and non-urgent goals, distinguishing according to importance may be harder. If so, try adding a “middle step,” using an approach suggested by Alan Lakein (1989). Here you would assign the categories “A,” “B,” or “C” to each goal. Assign “A” to those items which are most important to you, “B” to those of moderate importance, and “C” to those of low importance. Having identified the extremes—the “A’s” and the “C’s”—you may now find it easier to address the “middle” items—the “B’s”—and to reclassify them to either “A” or “C” categories. Then you can place them into their appropriate quadrants of the above Table. If, ultimately, certain “B” items are truly intermediate in their importance, you may have to give them intermediate levels of time and energy. (Not all jobs that are worth doing are worth doing exceedingly well!) Throughout, the point is to devote your time and energy according to your priorities, and to avoid getting bogged down by low priority tasks.

Third, plan ahead according to your priorities - especially those in Quadrants I & II

- **Make a long range timetable:** Identify academic goals and deadlines (e.g., dates of exams, dates papers are due, etc) and make target dates for your non-academic goals. Next, determine the steps you need to follow to reach these goals. Segment the larger activities into a series of smaller units. Then, make a reasonable timetable for accomplishing your goals on time.
- **Remember your day to day personal maintenance:** Certain activities—if neglected—will throw your life out of balance and undermine your high priority efforts (i.e., activities such as sleeping, eating, socializing, exercising, doing the laundry, etc.). Include them in your planning.
- **Plan each day and week as you go through the timetable:** Consider each week as a subcategory to be planned, and similarly each day within a given week. Each day and

each week, review your time table. New, unexpected items will come up; adjust your plans accordingly. (Hint: To avoid frustration, expect some unexpected things to happen—e.g., things like problems with your computer. Plan in extra time and/or be ready to adjust your plan, still keeping your high priority goals in mind.)

Fourth, avoid over-planning!

This may seem to contradict the preceding, but we mean it: avoid over-organizing. Beyond a certain point, adding techniques may simply create additional time problems rather than solving previous ones.

References and Additional Resources

Two excellent books relating to this topic are:

1. *How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life*. Alan Lakein. New York: Dutton, 1989.
2. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Stephen R. Covey. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.