

Simple Steps to Master Your Use of Time

By [Tara Kuther, Ph.D.](#), About.com Guide

<http://gradschool.about.com/cs/timemanagement/a/time.htm>

Use Multiple To-Do Lists

At this stage in your life it is likely that one to-do list isn't enough. Use multiple lists to organize tasks by topic or context. For example, you might maintain separate lists for each area of your life, such as home (for grocery lists, bills, and household tasks), social (for lists of friends and family to call, email, or contact on Facebook), and school (obviously, for maintaining lists of school-related tasks, like assignments and meetings with professors). [Don't lose your lists! -kp]

Break Each Large Task into Actionable Easy Tasks

The trick to making consistent progress on your tasks, especially academic tasks, is to separate each task into all of the smaller component tasks. For example, many students have an item on their academic list called: *Write a Paper for X Class*. That's one big task. Each time you look at that task it may seem overwhelming, so you glance over it and move on to the next easy task. What's an "easy" task? It's an actionable task - one that has a specific beginning and end and consists of no smaller steps. Easy tasks are less overwhelming because they are clear cut. To make sure that you tackle the big tasks, like writing a paper, it's essential that you break it into small "easy" actionable tasks, such as:

- Review the course textbook for paper ideas
- Run an Internet search on each idea to weed out inappropriate topics
- Choose two topics
- Meet with professor to discuss each topic
- Make a decision
- Brainstorm search phrases and topics for your library and Internet searches..... And so on

Prioritize Your Tasks

Once you prepare your lists you may find that you have much more to do than you ever realized - and feel pressured for time. Breathe. Relax. You don't have to do it all now. Some of it can wait a little while, more of it can wait even longer, and some of it may never get done. That's ok -- if you prioritize your tasks.

What's truly important to you? School work is important, but some tasks are more important than others. For example, suppose your professor assigns weekly short papers. You might feel pressured to complete these small papers before working on your large term paper for the same class. Prioritize! How much are the weekly papers worth to your grade as compared with the term paper? Many students spend a lot of time working on tasks, like short weekly papers, that account for a small percentage of their grade, for example 15%, over working on term papers and big projects that account for a much larger proportion of their grade, such as 50%. Prioritize to ensure that you're directing your effort to what matters. This is true in school but also in your personal life. How important is it that the kitchen floor be spotless?

Set deadlines for Yourself

Academic work entails many steps. Set a realistic deadline for each step. How do you determine what's realistic? Sit down with a calendar and think about how much time you will spend on your project each day and what you can complete in that time. Use your estimates to set deadlines. Recognize that you may have to adjust your deadlines. We often overestimate the amount of work that we can accomplish. Take this tendency into account by beginning your assignments early. [With practice, you'll get better at setting realistic deadlines, and then you won't have to spend much time figuring out when a deadline should be. -kp]

Be Flexible

While to-do lists are wonderful for helping you to organize and prioritize your life, remember that there will always be interruptions and distractions. Try to allow time for them. [I think the author means you should intentionally leave gaps in your schedule so you can deal with unexpected things that come up. -kp]

Go with Your Flow

Consider your own biological peaks and lows. Are you a morning person? Or are you at your best at night? Plan your day accordingly. Save your most difficult work for the times when you're at your best.

Say "No."

Sometimes we take on too much. Whether it's extra courses, job responsibilities, or extracurricular activities, consider how important each is to you before agreeing. [Do a simple form of cost/benefit analysis for each optional activity. Will you get enough out of it to make it worth the effort? -kp]

Make Use of Wasted Time

Have you ever noticed how much time you spend commuting, standing in lines, and waiting (for doctors, advisors, etc.)? Carry pocket work to make use of that time that would otherwise be wasted. Carry a short reading assignment or flash cards for studying. Or use the time to write in your planner and organize yourself. Ten minutes here, fifteen minutes there, it all adds up and you'll find that you can get more done.