

**PROCRASTINATION:
WHY DO I KEEP
LEAVING
EVERYTHING UNTIL
“TOMORROW” ?**

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WHAT DO THE PSYCHOLOGISTS SAY ABOUT PROCRASTINATION?

A recent article by Neenan and Dryden (1998) discusses the reasons for procrastination and ways to tackle it. Not everybody procrastinates in the same way or for the same reasons so it is important to work out what strategy will be most effective for you. It is necessary to examine the reasons why you are procrastinating. If you think underlying emotional reasons may be affecting you you may decide to see a counsellor (phone 020 7074 5015/6 or email counsellors@soas.ac.uk to arrange an appointment). Otherwise you need to work by yourself (or ideally with a colleague) to change your behaviour patterns in order to find a way to work. Changing behaviour isn't easy; you need to uncover your self-defeating beliefs that are stopping you getting on with your tasks and then develop an anti-procrastination attitude. Reading this booklet, thinking about your attitudes, and putting effort into changing them, could begin to help.

Here is a summary of psychologists' views on procrastination, all cited in the Neenan and Dryden article.

Burns suggests that people procrastinate because they:

- erroneously believe that they have to be motivated before they can perform a task;
- fear failure;
- lack pleasure or rewards associated with the task;
- find that the task is more difficult or frustrating than they expected.

Ellis and Knaus provide three main causes of procrastination:

- negative self-appraisal stemming from anticipated or actual poor performance or failing to get the approval of significant others;
- low tolerance of frustration which results in the effort involved in carrying out a task being seen as too much to bear, so that the task is avoided or quickly given up on if started;
- getting back at others by delaying tasks, or getting angry with others instead of self (eg complaining that people are distracting you from writing an assignment).

Glucksman suggests

- that some people procrastinate because of their family style (everyone in their family procrastinates);
- and others because they feel that they don't deserve success, and use procrastination as a way of undermining themselves.

On the next page there are some more ideas on procrastination and, following that, a collection of comments from other students. Read through this and see if any of it rings true for you.

Neenan, M. and Dryden, W. (1998) "Tackling procrastination: a rational emotive behaviour approach," in *Counselling*, May, pp. 117-121.

PROCRASTINATORS DO YOU FIT ONE OF THESE TYPES?

PERFECTIONIST

You are reluctant to start or finish a task because you might not achieve your unrealistically high standard.

DREAMER

You have a tendency towards vagueness and a lack of realism. You have great ideas but have difficulty transforming them into achievable goals.

WORRIER

You are afraid of things going wrong and of being overwhelmed by events. So you avoid risk or change and have little confidence in your ability to make decisions or tolerate discomfort.

CRISIS MAKER

You “enjoy” declaring that you can’t get motivated until the last moment, or that you do your best work then. You probably have a low threshold for boredom. Or perhaps you hope that your tasks will miraculously disappear or someone will come along and help you.

DEFIER

Either, You are aggressive and argumentative to others’ suggestions or instructions because it implies that others are trying to tell you what to do or control you.

Or, You are passive-aggressive and tend to say “Yes” when you mean “No.” This can be a way of getting back at others if you are afraid to voice your true feelings.

OVERDOER

You are always working at something and often making extra work for yourself but you don’t focus on the important issues that need to be tackled. You have difficulty saying “No.”

STUDENT IDEAS ON PROCRASTINATION

WHAT IS IT THAT YOU PUT OFF DOING?

- “Everything”
- Reading
- Research
- Reviewing and filing my notes
- Maths, things that I find difficult or don't enjoy
- Tasks that are not required / won't be marked / preparing for seminars
- Tasks that have no deadline
- Items that carry a lot of marks / are very important
- Revision / Exam preparation

WHAT DO YOU DO INSTEAD OF STUDYING?

- Watch TV
- Read novels and magazines, things that don't relate to study
- Spend time with family / friends socialising
- Help other people
- Do housework tidying and cleaning
- Sit and blame the lecturers for giving us so much work
- Get on with anything that isn't academic
- Do nothing, because I should be studying
- Eating

WHAT MIGHT HELP YOU TO GET GOING?

- Making a commitment to a short spell of studying to get myself started because “starting” is what matters
- Working in a particular place that suits me e.g. the library or home
- Setting my own deadlines
- Breaking my work down into smaller chunks

- Managing my time better; for example, planning what I'm going to do and when; ticking tasks off as they are completed
- Making a commitment to go to the library with /work with one or more others who are doing the same work; taking breaks to discuss progress / ideas
- Taking regular exercise; meditation
- Giving myself "rewards" after I've done some studying

STUDENT IDEAS ON PROCRASTINATION

DISADVANTAGES OF PROCRASTINATION

- No time to do work when you finally get around to it
- You may end up working all night
- Bottlenecks are created when several tasks have to be done at once
- Your time is wasted
- Other activities are postponed because of work hanging over you
- Stress is caused because the work is preying on your mind
- You feel awful; you can't relax; you feel angry
- You let yourself down because you don't produce good work
- Adverse effect on friends and family if you are pre-occupied with study
- The work task becomes so big in your mind that you feel overwhelmed
- You miss deadlines
- You lose marks
- You fail, or you're thrown off the course

ADVANTAGES OF PROCRASTINATION

- You have time to do other pleasurable things
- You can enjoy yourself; you can rest
- You can prioritise other tasks: work or family/friends
- You have thinking time; time to collect information and reflect
- You can enjoy being a martyr, complaining about how hard your life is and how much you have to do
- You avoid showing up the weaknesses that you think will be there if you do the work; you don't have to face up to your fear of failure
- You avoid thinking about difficult issues that might force you to change your ideas
- The fact that you have work hanging over you can be an excuse for not doing other things that you don't want to do

- You feel that you need more adrenalin to get the work done and that won't come until time is running out

Here are some of the most common blocks to concentration. Use them as a checklist and see if any are relevant to you

Distractions and interruptions. Obviously, it's going to be tough to concentrate if you are being assaulted by noise, people, visual movement, and phones, all of which are competing for and dividing your attention. Maybe you believe that you study better with background noise and like to have the TV, radio or music on while you study? This could be true, but check it out by studying in silence sometimes. Does that background noise help or hinder?

Lack of training and/or practice. concentration is a skill. You can't expect to be good at it if you've never been taught how to do it, or if you don't have opportunities to use it on a regular basis. There are, however, ways to learn and ways to practise, so read on!

Habit of inattention/preoccupation. Some people have so much going on in their lives, it is just normal for them to be "scattered."

Low frustration tolerance. Much of today's society focuses on making your life as easy as possible (eg, just count the number of commercials on TV for products that are designed to make your life convenient and free of hardship). That can be nice in terms of freeing you from time consuming menial labour, but it can make it tough to develop the mental discipline that's needed for complex tasks.

Lack of motivation. Simply said, there is no concentration without interest. What this means is if you are working on a task that has no natural attraction for you, you must arbitrarily provide interest to motivate yourself, or else your mind will persist to resist!

Unclear purpose or plan. Sometimes when you can't concentrate, it's because your mind was never given an order. Give your mind a destination (chosen project) and a mental road map (visualisation), or a step-by-step action plan.

Mental clutter/overload. For some people, an inability to concentrate isn't the result of their failure to choose a project, it's because they've chosen too many! If you have too many commitments, obligations, and deadlines clamouring for your attention, your mind figuratively throws up its hands and says "I can't take it anymore."

Fatigue, stress, poor health. concentration is directed mental energy. If you're tired, physically out-of-shape, or ill, you simply won't have the energy necessary to apply yourself mentally. Drugs and alcohol can chemically affect your ability to focus and hold attention.

Unresolved emotions. Sometimes when you aren't able to focus and maintain attention, it isn't because you can't, it's because another major problem is demanding all your attention and there's none left over for your other responsibilities.

Negative attitude. This could be the most powerful block of all. Psychologist William James said, "We act in accordance with our beliefs." You can even have all the other elements going "right" for you, but if in your mind you don't believe you can concentrate, you will be right! If you say, "I can't concentrate in that noisy library," you'll be right! If you say, "I can't concentrate under pressure," you'll be right!

Procrastination. Procrastination is defined as the automatic postponement of an unpleasant task, for no good reason. Some people habitually put off unappealing matters without taking into account the consequences of their delay. Procrastination is a variation on the theme of low frustration tolerance; if the mind doesn't like what it's being told to do, it just says, "I'll do it later."

MOTIVATION

- ↪ Don't plan to study any one subject for too long: two hours is often enough before moving on to something different.
- ↪ Break your time up into manageable periods. A concentration span is usually somewhere between 20 and 50 minutes. If you don't take a break (get up and physically move around) your concentration will dwindle.
- ↪ Set yourself achievable tasks and reward yourself when they're achieved. (For example, watch the TV, go out for a drink, phone a friend for a chat, after you've achieved your goal, not before!)
- ↪ Study subjects you like least or find most difficult first, when you are fresh. Leave the things you like best or find easiest until last. (You may need to break yourself into studying by a brief spell of something easy but move quickly on to the problem subject).
- ↪ If you find a topic boring, try and find at least one aspect that interests you and begin to explore **it**. Use this to get yourself more interested in the topic. Don't plan to spend too long on a "boring" subject. It's better to plan to spend half an hour on it and do so, than plan to spend the whole evening but keep putting it off!
- ↪ View topics of learning as part of a bigger jigsaw. Make and look for links between one subject and another.
- ↪ Look for books or articles that interest you and appeal to you (by their layout, arrangement of topics, focus etc.). These may not necessarily be the set texts, but if they appeal to you they may be a more sensible initial starting point.
- ↪ **If** at all possible, try to relate your study topics to any work you have done or to the "real world."
- ↪ Keep reminding yourself of your goals. Why are you studying? Can you see why this particular (awful) assignment is necessary?

THE THREE STEP PLAN

GTD (Get Things Done) PLAN

Try this plan when you have several things to get done and lots of interruptions!

Step 1.

Make a master list of all the things you have to do in the next few weeks.

Pick from your master list the 7 most important tasks to be done that day.

You may be thinking, "But I've got more things to do than that. Why only seven items?"

Most people can only maintain a maximum of seven items **in their short term** memory.

- A short list allows for the insertion and handling of those spontaneous matters and emergencies that crop up throughout the day that have to take precedence over what you're working on.
- Research has concluded that visual order can enhance mental order. In other words, if your "to do" list is a mish-mash of notes, you'll become confused every time you look at it. If it neatly reflects what has to be done that day, your mind will have clear, organized "marching orders."
- How many items do you have on your "to do" list? Ten? Twenty? Thirty? One definition of stress is "feeling overwhelmed." Does looking at your list prompt thoughts like "I'll never be able to get through all that!" Have you ever stopped to realize that you may be stressing yourself out by looking at your "to do" list? Every glimpse leads to a feeling of being "over-burdened" and your mental load weighs down your energy. Keep your master list accessible but out of sight (hence out of mind).

Step 2.

On a fresh piece of paper, start at the top and list the seven items in order of priority.

- Number one is the most pressing thing that needs to be done, number two is the second most important, and so on.
- Are you saying, "There's no way I could select just one thing that's *most* important.
- They're all important?" It's important to understand a fundamental concept of concentration. Your mind can only think of one thing at a time. It can switch back and forth very quickly between several objects, but it is physically capable of holding only one thought at a time.
- It may be true you have several projects that are all top priority. You still need to pick one that you're going to give your attention to right now.

Step 3.

Start working on your number one priority and work on it until you have it finished, or until a higher priority takes precedence.

In the real world, you may only get to concentrate on your top priority for a short time before you're interrupted. Use the techniques below to stay in charge of your study environment.

- Determine what a caller or family or household member wants and ask yourself, "Is this more important than what I'm working on right now?"
- If it is, switch your attention to it AFTER doing something to facilitate your return to your original project.
- If it is not, have the courage to deflect diplomatically or to terminate the conversation courteously so you can return to your top priority.

If you are thinking that these are just common sense time management techniques, you're right! But just because something is common sense it doesn't mean that it is common practice. Practise these techniques and you can take charge of your concentration and optimise your effectiveness.

SEVEN TIPS FOR MOTIVATING YOURSELF TO CONCENTRATE ON UNINTERESTING TASKS

TIP 1: Use the Ten Minute Plan to get yourself started

A good way to make yourself *feel* like doing something is to *start* it. Did you ever study the Law of Inertia and the Law of Momentum in science classes at school? These laws state that “a still body tends to stay stationary,” and “a body in motion tends to stay in motion.” You can counter the Law of Inertia and help yourself gain momentum by making it a habit to use the Ten Minute Plan. The Ten Minute Plan simply means the next time you’re contemplating a task and you’re not motivated, say “I don’t feel like starting this project, BUT I’M GOING TO START IT ANYWAY.”

The “deal” you make with yourself is that at the end of ten minutes, if you’re still not interested, you can stop. Most of the time, once you have got yourself out of inertia and into motion, you’re so glad to finally be getting this task done that you are motivated to continue.

One thing I’ve not been doing because I haven’t *felt* like it is:

I realize I may never feel like doing this, so I am going to help myself get started by:

TIP 2: Always give yourself a starting time and an ending time when thinking about a task

“That which can be done at any time, rarely gets done at all.” Sometimes when you’re not concentrating on a project, it’s because your mind wasn’t given a deadline. “I really should get that report finished” is more of a half-hearted wish than an order to your mind to focus.

If you want your mind to “get to work,” you need to give it an explicit order, such as, “I’m going to start on my essay plan at 6:00 and work on it until 7:00.” When you assign yourself a starting and ending time for a project, be sure to give yourself less time than you think you need. Why? Because of “Parkinson’s Law” which states that a task expands (or contracts) to the time allocated for it.

A task I have not started because I haven’t given myself a starting time or an ending time is:

I’m going to give myself a sense of urgency by ordering myself to start it by:
and finish it by:

TIP 3: Use Henry Ford’s wise advice. Divide and conquer

The famous car manufacturer once said, "Nothing is particularly difficult if you divide it up." Sometimes if you're finding it difficult to concentrate, it's because your chosen project is overwhelming. If your mind perceives that your order is impossible, it will refuse to co-operate. It doesn't want to attempt something that it "can't do." *It doesn't like to fail.*

Is there something you've been putting off? Has it been because the task (anything from *house* work to *home* work) loomed too large in your mind? can you divide it up so it's more palatable?

I've been putting off:

I'm going to divide it up into achievable chunks as follows:

so I feel capable of successfully attempting it.

TIP 4: if you are bored with a task....make it more difficult

If you're working on something that's not very stimulating.., find a way to make it more demanding so you *have* to pay attention. If you're in a lecture and your mind is wandering, force yourself to sit up, lean forward, look at the speaker, and raise your eyebrows in an expression of interest.

A task I find boring is:

I'm going to make it **demand** my attention by

And finish **it by:**

How long does it take? From now on, I'm going to motivate myself to do this without grumbling by saying:

Tip 5: Fast forward your mind to the benefits

The next time you're not concentrating (starting) on something that has the potential to enrich your life, ask yourself these questions, "What will matter a year from now? Am I acting in a way

I will regret in future?” Hopefully, this will give you the incentive to take action (concentrate) on a chosen project that will add value to your life.

Something I've not done because I've focused on the difficulties instead of the benefits, is:

I'm going to choose to fast forward to the benefits. In order to move myself into action I am going to focus on:

TIP 6: Verbally minimize an unpleasant task

Have you ever been looking for something **in** your fridge, noticed some out-of-date yoghurt hiding on a back shelf, and said to yourself, “I really should throw that away”- and then closed the door and gone about your business? Sometimes the things you're not concentrating on would only take seconds or minutes to do. The next time you're about to mindlessly pass over something that needs to be done, ask yourself how long it will take. If it's only a minute, SAY SO. Saying out loud “I'm here; this will only take two minutes” makes it also embarrassing not to attend to the task at-hand.

What's a study- related task you have to do frequently that you don't like to do?

TIP 7: Self –talk yourself out of procrastination

One definition of procrastination is the “automatic postponement of an unpleasant task-for *no good reason*.” The key word is “automatic” (without considering the consequences, you just think “I’ll do it later”).

What is something on which you have been procrastinating?

Ask yourself these questions to bring you face to face with the consequences of delaying action.

Do I **have** to do this task?

If the answer is no, then this isn’t procrastination. You may be putting this off, but with good reason.

If your answer is “Yes, I do **have** to do this task,” then move on to the next question.

Do I **want** to have this task **done**?

Is the answer “No”? Then once again you’re delaying action, but perhaps with good reason.
Is your answer “Yes, I do want to have this done ?” Then move on to the next question.
Will this task be any easier to do later ?

If the answer is “Yes,” then once again, you’re putting it off - but with good reason. If your answer is “No, this task won’t be easier to do later” THEN DO IT NOW!

This is the “Face the Music” approach to procrastination. If you have to do it, if you want to have it done, and if you realize it won’t be any easier later, then start it **now**. Be sure to ask yourself these three questions whenever you don’t feel like concentrating on something!

These tips are taken from:

Horn, Sam (1991) *Concentration: How to Focus for Success*, Crisp Publications

THINKING ABOUT PROCRASTINATION

For each of the items indicate the extent to which the statement is true for you.

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers

STUDY HABITS	OFTEN	SOME-TIMES	ALMOST NEVER
1. I find it hard to do a study task that I don't find interesting or important.			
2. Even when I know that an assignment has to be done, I delay starting until the last minute.			
3. When I'm studying I find myself thinking about times when I've had negative feedback on previous assignments.			
4. I am often late for appointments, meetings and classes.			
5. I "waste" free time between classes rather than getting started on my studying.			
6. I overestimate the amount of work that I can do in a given time.			
7. When a deadline is approaching I find myself doing other things rather than studying.			
8. When I think about an assignment I imagine that I must do it perfectly.			
9. When I am studying I worry that I don't really understand what I am supposed to be doing.			
10. I have to rush frantically to meet deadlines.			
11. I put off making decisions until the last minute.			

12. When I have to be somewhere at a certain time my friends and family know that I will be late.			
13. When I should be studying I find myself daydreaming.			
14. When I am studying I worry about the possibility of failure or low marks.			
15. I am easily distracted from my studying by friends, television, household tasks etc.			

THINKING ABOUT PROCRASTINATION

Problems with procrastination seem to fall into 3 categories:

issues to do with emotions, time management & skills. Have a look at this chart and tick the statements that seem to apply to you. There are no right or wrong answers. Then look at the chart with comments below

<i>STUDY HABITS</i>	<i>TICK IF THIS APPLIES TO YOU</i>
1. I find it hard to do a study task that I don't find interesting or important.	
2. Even when I know an assignment has to be done, I delay starting until the last minute.	
3. When I'm studying I find myself thinking about times when I've had negative feedback on previous assignments.	
4. I am often late for appointments, meetings and classes,	
5. I "waste" free time between classes rather than getting started on my studying.	
6. I overestimate the amount of work that I can do in a given time.	
7. When a deadline is approaching I find myself doing other things rather than studying.	
8. When I think about an assignment imagine that I must do it perfectly.	
9. When I am studying I worry that I don't really understand what I am supposed to be doing.	
10. I have to rush frantically to meet dead lines.	
11. I put off making decisions until the last minute.	
12. When I have to be somewhere at a certain time my friends and family know that I will be late.	
13. When I should be studying I find myself daydreaming.	

14. When I am studying I worry about the possibility of failure or low marks.	
15. I'm easily distracted from my studying by friends, television, household tasks etc.	

THINKING ABOUT PROCRASTINATION

Problems with procrastination seem to fall into 3 categories: issues to do with emotions, time management & study skills which sometimes overlap. The counselling service can offer help with emotional issues. The Learning and Teaching Unit can offer help with study skills. Both counsellors and Learning and Teaching staff can help you with time management

Time management

<i>STUDY HABITS</i>	<i>COMMENTS</i>
1 I find it hard to do a study task that I don't find interesting or important.	This could be both an emotional issue (not understanding why you need to do the work) and /or a skills issue (not knowing how to approach it).
2. Even when I know an assignment has to be done, I delay starting until the last minute.	This could be both an emotional issue (not wanting to face the work) and / or a time management one(not realising when you need to start).
3. When I'm studying I find myself thinking about times when I've had negative feedback on previous assignments.	This seems to be mainly emotional - past feedback undermining your confidence. However, sometimes thinking sensibly about negative feedback and why you got it can be useful. But then leave the worry behind.
4. I am often late for appointments, meetings and classes,	This is most likely time management unless you are deliberately turning up late?
5. I "waste" free time between classes rather than getting started on my studying.	Again, probably time management. The minutes just drift away. But remember that you do need some breaks during the day so it is not necessarily time wasted.
6. I overestimate the amount of work that I can do in a given time.	Mainly a skills issue — you need to organise your work more effectively; also time management — are you wasting time you meant to spend studying?
7. When a deadline is approaching I find myself doing other things rather than studying.	Probably emotional, putting off facing the study task (for whatever reason). Could also be skills related — maybe you don't know what you are supposed to be doing.
8. When I think about an assignment I imagine that I must do it perfectly.	An emotional issue. Why does it have to be perfect? Who is telling you this? Can it ever be perfect, anyway. It just needs to be good enough.

<p>9. When I am studying I worry that I don't really understand what I am supposed to be doing.</p>	<p>This could be skills – you are actually unsure and need to seek clarification from colleagues or lecturer. Or it may be an emotional issue and you are putting yourself down and using lack of understanding as a reason for not getting on with work</p>
<p>10. I have to rush frantically to meet deadlines.</p>	<p>Primarily time management but you also need to look at skills (how to do work more effectively) and emotional issues (why are you putting things off to the last minute?).</p>
<p>11. I put off making decisions until the last minute.</p>	<p>Maybe it's a skills issue, how to make decisions about steps to take, or maybe it's emotional, "I can't make decisions?"</p>
<p>12. When I have to be somewhere at a certain time my friends and family know that I will be late.</p>	<p>Suggests that time management could be a general problem for you, not necessarily tied to the stress of assignments.</p>
<p>13. When I should be studying I find myself daydreaming.</p>	<p>Might be emotional (trying to get away from reality! feeling homesick) or could be skills (lacking 'tricks 'to get you started). But realise that daydreaming is good for you — at the right time.</p>
<p>14. When I am studying I worry about the possibility of failure or low marks.</p>	<p>Another emotional issue. Use disappointments as an opportunity for learning where you can improve and then forget them and focus on the present</p>
<p>15. I'm easily distracted from my studying by friends, television, household tasks etc.</p>	<p>Probably mainly a skills issue unless you are deliberately using these other activities to put off studying.</p>