



Fundamentals of Time and Task Management

by Members of the Bureau of Study Counsel staff*

1. Know what you need to do. Know when things are due.

Take an inventory of everything you need to do. That is, **make an exhaustive list** of everything you need to do – from writing a paper, to filling out an application, to picking up drycleaning, to getting a birthday card for someone, to buying toothpaste. If an item has a due date or deadline, note that on the list. It might seem overwhelming to look at the list. But once it is on paper, you don't have to expend energy generating and regenerating that list in your head, and you don't run the risk of losing track of some items.

2. Plan backwards. To gauge the timing of your tasks, work in multiple time frames, working backwards from due dates.

Many college papers, problem sets, and other projects take more than one sitting to complete. The kind of thinking they require is complex enough that it takes time to develop. When budgeting your time for any complex task, note the due date. Then, working backwards in time from that point to the present, make note of marker points by which you would want to have completed various portions of the task: in reverse order, printing and sending/delivering the paper; making edits; producing a draft (or drafts); freewriting about how to reckon with a particularly difficult part of your argument; freewriting in the service of developing an argument; doing reading and research; consulting (e.g., with your TF, an academic counselor at the Bureau of Study Counsel, a research librarian); deciding on a topic; doing preliminary exploration of topic ideas; brainstorming/freewriting about possible topics; etc. Planning backwards in time can help you to get a feel for what is realistically possible and to avoid last-minute crunches.

You can use this working backwards method in smaller time frames as well (e.g., "If I'm going to meet Ann for dinner at 6 p.m., and I want to work out and shower before that, and that will realistically take an hour, and it'll take me ten minutes to walk to where we're meeting for dinner, and I also want to have read the chapter for tonight's class, and the last chapter took me two hours to read, then . . .").

Keep multiple size time frames in mind and on paper. That is, make a timeline or calendar for the **semester**, the **month**, the **week**, and **today** (see pp. 3 and 4). This will help you plan how much time you realistically need.

3. Take stock of how much discretionary time you have. Set priorities accordingly.

On a daily or weekly schedule sheet, **mark out all of the time that is already spoken for** (see p. 4). Remember that you have legitimate claims on your time beyond classes. So mark out time for classes and also for meals, exercise, appointments, sleep, errands, relaxation, play, and just "doing nothing."[†] Remember to leave transit time and

* Items # 1, 2 and #3 are taken or adapted from "Managing Your Time," a handout previously developed by members of the Bureau of Study Counsel staff, Copyright © 1994 by President and Fellows of Harvard College. Items # 4 and #5 are taken (with permission from the author) from "Twenty Tips for Senior Thesis Writers (and other writers, too)," by Sheila M. Reindl, Ed.D., Copyright © 1989, 2004, 2011 by Sheila M. Reindl; that handout is available at the Bureau of Study Counsel, Harvard University.

"I like that too," said Christopher Robin, "but what I like *doing* best is Nothing."

"How do you do Nothing?" asked Pooh, after he had wondered for a long time.

"Well, it's when people call out at you just as you're going off to do it, What are you going to do, Christopher Robin, and you say, Oh nothing, and then you go and do it."

"Oh, I see," said Pooh.

"This is the sort of thing that we're doing right now."

"Oh, I see," said Pooh again.

"It means just going along, listening to all the things you can't hear, and not bothering."

"Oh!" said Pooh.

From Milne, A.A. 1928, 1956. The House at Pooh Corner, in *The World of Pooh*. New York: Dutton Children's Books, 307.

transition time – literally the time it takes to get from one place to another and the time it takes to switch gears and settle in to the next thing you do. The time that remains is discretionary time that you can spend in other ways – for example, reading, writing papers, or completing your problem sets.

Once you know just how much time you actually have, you are in a position to return to your inventory list and prioritize and prune the items there: What is **top priority** (you must start it today)? What can be **abbreviated** (e.g., instead of doing all of your laundry today, just doing one load, or washing by hand a few things for tomorrow; instead of reading the whole book, overviewing the book (with the help of the preface, table of contents, and conclusion) to get a sense of which parts are most relevant for you to read for tomorrow's tutorial discussion)? You might decide that some can be **delegated, postponed, or canceled**. When you have a pruned and prioritized list, you are in a position to turn goals into tasks: Which items can be **broken down into smaller tasks**? You can then place those tasks in time, dedicating a particular time to a particular task.

4. Break larger projects down into smaller tasks. Employ the “S-O-S strategy”[‡]: Specific, Observable Steps.

A big project becomes do-able when we break it down into do-able tasks. Think in terms of specific, observable steps, i.e., small, realistic tasks that you can picture yourself actually doing and completing – not distant or abstract goals or unrealistically ambitious steps. “I’m going to stop procrastinating” and “I will balance work and play” are examples of distant or abstract goals. “I’ll start every paper the day it’s assigned” and “I’m going to work all weekend on this paper” are noble intentions but might be unrealistically ambitious aims. “I’m going to work on my thesis for five hours between lunch and dinner” is another example of a plan that is neither specific nor observable: with such a vague intention, there is nothing specific you can picture yourself starting, doing, and finishing.

By contrast, “I’m going to free-write for fifteen minutes about what I’ve been thinking in response to the lectures and readings in this course” is an example of a specific, observable step. Other examples of specific and observable steps are: “I am going to take fifteen to twenty minutes and write a memo to myself about all of the questions I might possibly want to address in my paper and what makes me interested in those questions”; “I am going to freewrite about what my central question might be, the question to which the whole project will be a response”; “I am going to take an inventory of all the things I can say, all the things I wish I could say but don’t know if I have the evidence to support, and all of the hunches I have”; and “I am going to write a memo to myself about what makes my question a hard one to answer.” If you find yourself avoiding a specific, observable step, break it down into even smaller tasks.

5. Work in fifteen- to twenty-minute stretches.

We tend to approach big jobs by thinking we need big amounts of time. We say to ourselves, “I need to write this paper. It’s 1 o’clock now. I’m free until dinner at 6 o’clock. That’s five hours. I should get a lot done.” But in fact, we barely make a dent. We brush our teeth, do our laundry, check our email, pay a few bills, straighten our room, make a list of errands, hang out with our friends, go on Facebook. But we spend very little **time on task** (e.g., the task of writing the paper or doing the problem set). That’s because few of us can work for five solid hours on one thing, especially something as difficult and anxiety-provoking as writing or problem-solving.

Especially if you are having difficulty getting started or staying with an onerous task, try working for very small stretches of time. **Work for fifteen to twenty minutes, break for five**, is not a bad guideline. You might be surprised at how much you can get done in fifteen to twenty focused minutes. It is much better to work for fifteen or twenty minutes and get something done, however small, than to keep thinking for five hours that you should be working and be so daunted that you get nothing done and then feel discouraged, demoralized, and guilty.

[‡] The notion of specific, observable steps is drawn from Jane Burka and Lenore Yuen, authors of *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wellesley, 1983). The “S-O-S strategy” is a term coined by Sheila Reindl (see “Twenty Tips for Senior Thesis Writers (and other writers, too),” by Sheila M. Reindl, Ed.D., Copyright © Sheila M. Reindl 1989, 1994, 1996, 2003, 2011, 2012, 2017, 2018, available at the Bureau of Study Counsel, Harvard University, bsc.harvard.edu).

FOUR TIME FRAMES

THE SEMESTER/MONTH

September	October	November	December	January
February	March	April	May	June

THE MONTH/WEEK

September						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	

THE WEEK/DAY

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
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THE DAY/HOUR

12 a.m. midn't	1 a.m.	2 a.m.	3 a.m.	4 a.m.	5 a.m.	6 a.m.	7 a.m.	8 a.m.	9 a.m.	10 a.m.	11 a.m.
12 p.m. noon	1 p.m.	2 p.m.	3 p.m.	4 p.m.	5 p.m.	6 p.m.	7 p.m.	8 p.m.	9 p.m.	10 p.m.	11 p.m.

ONE-WEEK SCHEDULE

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
12 midn't							
1 a.m.							
2 a.m.							
3 a.m.							
4 a.m.							
5 a.m.							
6 a.m.							
7 a.m.							
8 a.m.							
9 a.m.							
10 a.m.							
11 a.m.							
12 noon							
1 p.m.							
2 p.m.							
3 p.m.							
4 p.m.							
5 p.m.							
6 p.m.							
7 p.m.							
8 p.m.							
9 p.m.							
10 p.m.							
11 p.m.							