

# 20 Strategies to Overcome Procrastination

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## 1. Worst-first approach.

The harder and more unpleasant a task is, the better it is to do it immediately. Get it out of the way! This is particularly true of big pieces of an assessment which can be overwhelming and require more time.

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## 2. Remember-forgetting technique.

Whenever you remember forgetting to do something that you've been putting off, do it (at least some of it) immediately.

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## 3. Bits and pieces approach.

Do anything in connection with the task you want to accomplish. Start with something relatively easy, e.g. deciding on an essay topic. Gradually do more and more until the task itself doesn't seem so impossible to do. This is a good way to start on large and overwhelming assignments to reduce the stress levels. Getting started is often the hardest thing to do.

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## 4. Break it down.

If your task seems too big or overwhelming, break it down into a series of smaller, more achievable tasks or steps that will add up to completing the job. For example, for a big essay, the small steps might be:

**Step 1** – Decide on a topic.

**Step 2** – Find 10 relevant articles.

**Step 3** – Read and summarise each article

**Step 4** – Plan the structure of your essay

**Step 5** – Write the introduction

**Step 6** – Write 200 words of the main body

**Step 7** – Review what you've done and check you're on the right track

**Step 8** – Write another 200 words and so on\*. Concentrate on taking the first step, then the next until you complete the full journey. (\*This is just an example. Please contact a learning adviser for more specific advice on breaking down assessment tasks.)

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## 5. Five minute plan.

Sit down and work on something for just five minutes. At the end of that time, move onto something else, or set yourself another five minutes on the original task. Chances are you'll already be involved enough to keep going.

## 6. Positives and negatives.

Make a list of all the good things that will happen when you stop procrastinating and the not so good things that will happen if you continue to procrastinate. Think about these each time you find yourself procrastinating.

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## 7. Reward yourself.

Set up a system where you use pleasurable activities (even small ones) as a means of rewarding yourself when you've done the work you planned to do, rather than using those pleasurable activities as a way of avoiding that work. For example, make sitting down and watching your favourite TV show a reward for doing an hour of work on that assignment, rather than the thing that delays starting the work.

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## 8. Ask for help.

If you get stuck for any reason, ask someone for help, e.g. a friend, classmate, tutor or lecturer, rather than abandoning the task altogether. If you can't access who you need straight away, plan when you'll speak to them and try tackling another aspect of the task that you don't need help with.

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## 9. Pick your times.

Schedule the task or activity you've been putting off at a time when you're most alert, rested and energised, and therefore more likely to do it – and put it in your diary. Planning to tackle a difficult assignment when you're tired is not likely to result in you actually doing it.

## 10. Develop good habits generally.

Procrastinating can become a pattern of behaviour. Try to break that pattern by making a conscious effort to deal with things straight away, rather than putting them off.

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## 11. Establish priorities.

There is always going to be a lot of competing demands for your time. Think about what they are, set some priorities and stick to them!

## 12. Manage your time.

Use semester and weekly planners and diaries to organise your time. Set specific dates and times to begin or continue your work. 'Later' is a really hard time to pin down!

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## 13. Change your environment.

Make whatever changes you need to increase the likelihood that you will get your work done. If you can't study at home, find a place where you can.

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## 14. Minimise potential distractions.

It's easier to focus on the task at hand if there is less likelihood of distraction, so try and take yourself away from the things most likely to distract you. For example, trying to study right next to your computer is probably not going to be successful if checking social posts is one of the main things you do to procrastinate. Likewise, studying with a friend isn't going to work if you're likely to spend most of the time talking rather than working.

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## 15. Visible reminders.

Put up notes or signs in prominent places like your fridge or a mirror, to remind you there is something that needs to be done.

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## 16. Self monitoring.

Keep a record of when you're avoiding tasks - what were the excuses you used? What were the thoughts and feelings you were experiencing at the time? What did you do instead of the task you'd planned to do? Look for patterns. Once you know what your procrastination 'looks like' you'll be in a much better position to do something about it.

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## 17. Talk yourself into it.

How you think about things plays a big part in how you feel about them and your subsequent behaviour in relation to them. When you procrastinate, you're probably talking yourself out of doing something, i.e. "It's too boring"... "It's too hard"... "I've got plenty of time"... Instead, try talking yourself into doing it, i.e. "I'll feel better once it's done"... "If I start now I won't be so stressed later"... "This topic might be quite interesting"...

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## 18. Set some goals.

Think about what you want to achieve in the short, medium and long term. Write them down. Map out how the task that you're avoiding fits into achieving those goals. If you can see that the task has some useful purpose it may help you to get started. And remember, all assignments, exams and study periods have an important role to play if one of your goals is "pass my units" or "get my degree"!

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## 19. Know your thinking traps.

Try to think realistically about the task that you're avoiding. How bad is it really? If you had to list it on a scale of 1 to 100, where 100 is the worst thing in the world you can think of having to do and 1 is the best, where would it go? This may help give you some perspective about the task you're putting off. Most of the time people tend to blow the unpleasantness of having to do a certain task way out of proportion. What are you avoiding? Many people procrastinate because they have unhelpful thoughts that they lack confidence in their abilities or are preoccupied with thinking that whatever they produce has to be 100% right or perfect. Of course, procrastinating means you risk running out of time anyway, and lose the opportunity to do as well as you can. Accept the task as a learning experience; that you'll make mistakes. Then reflect on what procrastinating is costing you in terms of your time, energy, effort and even money. What else could you be doing if you weren't procrastinating?

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## 20. Be persistent, but patient.

Breaking a bad habit can be difficult and can take some time. Don't expect to go from champion procrastinator to model student overnight. Find the strategies that seem to work best for you and practice them. Notice and reward small improvements in your procrastinating behaviour. There is no quick fix for procrastination - it takes time and effort and no one else can fix it for you.

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