

20 Strategies to Overcome Procrastination

Counselling Service Tip Sheet



1. Worst-first approach

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

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.

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 tasks which are large and overwhelming or a bit stressful. Often getting started is the hardest thing to do.

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 you have to take in order to complete the task. 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. Sometimes you might need a lot of steps, other times, only a few. (* This is just an example. Please contact a learning adviser for more specific advice on breaking down assessment tasks.)

5. Five minute plan

Sit down and work on something for just five minutes. At the end of five minutes, move onto something else if you want, or set yourself another five minutes on the original task. Chances are you'll already be involved enough to keep going. Getting started is often the hardest step to take.

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 are associated with continuing to procrastinate. Think about these each time you find yourself procrastinating.

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 your start on the work.

8. Ask for help

If you get stuck for any reason, ask someone for help (e.g. a friend, class mate, tutor or lecturer) rather than abandoning the task all together. If you can't access who you need straight away, make a definite plan as to when you will speak to them and try tackling another aspect of the task that you don't need help with.

9. Pick your times

Schedule the task or activity you've been putting off at a time when you are 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 are 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 immediately rather than putting them off.

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, and continue, your work. 'Later' is a really hard time to pin down!

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.

14. Minimise potential distractions

It is 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 surfing the Internet is one of the primary ways that you procrastinate. Likewise, studying with your friend is not going to work if you are likely to spend most of the time talking rather than working.

15. Visible reminders

Put up notes or signs in prominent places (e.g. fridge, mirror, phone, computer) to remind you that there is something that needs to be done.

16. Self monitoring

Keep a record of when you are 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 had planned to do? Look for patterns. Once you know what your procrastination 'looks like' you will be in a much better position to do something about it.

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 are probably talking yourself out of doing something ("It's too boring..." "It's too hard"... "I've got plenty of time"...). Instead, try talking yourself into doing it ("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"...).

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 are 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"!

19. Know your thinking

traps

The catastrophe scale.

Try to think realistically about the task that you are 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 that 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 are 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 what they lack confidence in their abilities or are preoccupied with thinking that whatever they produce has to be 100% "right" or "perfect". Then 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 will 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?!

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. Unfortunately there is no easy, quick fix for procrastination - it takes time and effort and no one else can fix it for you.

References

More tips and information is available from:

- Counselling Tip Sheet: Managing Stress
- Counselling Tip Sheet: Tips for Successful Time Management
- Counselling Tip Sheet: Study Tips

Acknowledgements

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Please note that this tip-sheet provides information and guidance only - it is not a substitute for professional counselling and support.

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