



PLANNING AND ORGANISATION

Use this sheet to help you:

- Plan your time by semester, week and day
- Study efficiently and effectively
- Avoid procrastination
- Prepare for exams

5 minute self test

Poor planning and organising approaches are a prime cause of academic failure at university.

1. How effective do you consider your planning and organising approaches are at present?

Very effective

Somewhat effective

Largely ineffective

2. What aspects of your planning and organising approaches do you believe are particularly ineffective?

3. What specific changes do you think are needed to address these problems?

Introduction

It may seem very obvious, but the best way to succeed in higher education is to **manage your time and keep a planner**.

This is so obvious, however, virtually nobody does it. As a result, a lot of time is wasted and much inefficiency is caused by students repeating things. Sometimes students forget to do things they should have done, or do things they did not need to do. A great deal of time is wasted in the library when a simple question at the information desk would solve the problem, for example.

Another example of inefficiency is waiting to receive an essay topic from your lecturer before starting to do research for an essay. Almost all students do this. Yet, because they do, there are problems gaining access to some references in the library when they start their assignments. There is no reason whatever why students cannot start research for essays prior to the start of semester. All it takes is a little planning and resourcefulness.

NOTE: *The main reason for failure at higher degree studies is lack of organisation and planning*

Lack of time management means that the student's study time is not used effectively and their "rest" time is filled with work that should have been done much earlier.

In university, at postgraduate degree level, you are assumed to be competent in time management. The lecturer will make no concession to you for "being late" or "forgetting something". There are many ways to become better at time management and this Helpsheet will teach you some of these methods.

Making a Weekly Planner

The first thing to do is to make a personal **weekly timetable**. There are several golden rules that you should follow when you make your timetable (see below). First do the following exercise:

Exercise, Study Patterns

- How long do you spend over
 - (a) breakfast?
 - (b) lunch?
 - (c) evening meal?
 - (d) drinks during the day?
- How many hours do you need to sleep each night in order to wake up refreshed the following morning?
- What are your regular commitments as a student? (lectures, tutorials, labs, fieldwork, **CELT** consultation time, library times, etc).
- Are there any other regular commitments that you should take into account when planning a week's work? (religious commitments may be one, sporting practice may be another. Shopping and cooking are definitely regular commitments.)

Exercise, Study Patterns

Look at the extract from a university student's timetable below. Are there any criticisms you would make of it?

Time	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
7-8							
8-9	study	study	study		study	study	study
10-11	study	study	study		study	study	church
12-1	study				study	study	church
1-2	study		study		study		
2-3	study	study	study		study	study	
4-5	study	study	study		study	study	study
6-7	study	study			study	study	study
8-9	study					study	study
10-11	study				study	study	
12-1	study	study	study		study		study
1-2	study	study	study		study	study	study
3-4	study	study	study		study	study	

No doubt you will see several things wrong with the above timetable:

- Study periods are far too long (concentration span in normal humans is about 40 minutes)
- There are no lecture and tutorial times given
- One day is completely free of commitments. This suggests inefficiency (regular study patterns are best).
- It is not clear when the student wakes up, travels to university, does the shopping, etc.

Now look at this timetable:

Time	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
7-7:30	breakfast	breakfast	breakfast	breakfast	breakfast	breakfast	sleep
7:30-8	study	study	study	study	study	study	sleep
8-8:30	travel	travel	travel	travel	travel	study	sleep
8:30-9	study	study	study	study	study		sleep
9-9:30	Lecture 1	Celt	Lecture 2	Library	Lecture 3		travel
9:40-10	study	study	study	Lab	study	study	Library
10-10:30	Tute 1	study	Tute 2	Lab		study	study
10:30-11	study			Lab	study	Library	
11-11:30	study	study				Library	study
11:30-12						study	
12-1	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH
1-1:30	study	study					
1:30-2	study	study	study				

In this timetable there are some improvements:

- Realistic study periods with breaks in between (don't study for longer than an hour without a short 5 minute break).
- Times scheduled for classes, labs, tutes, library research time, etc
- Times scheduled for social events
- Free periods scheduled
- Realistic waking times, travel time, etc

You will find that it is not as easy as it looks designing a timetable that you can keep. You may need to do it several times before you get one that is right for you.

Golden Rule 1, Establishing a Daily Routine

1. Regularity

Efficient study is all about regularity. But, unless you are an exceptionally organised person already you need to train yourself to be regular. In this case you need train your brain to work at peak performance. This means you need to subject it to a regular rhythm. This is why you need a weekly planner that works for you.

Studying at different times of the day will mean you will be distracted. An example of distraction is starring at the same page on an article for 20 minutes. This is not efficient study.

You need to treat study like a regular job. To teach yourself to be regular make sure you work at the same times every day. When you sit down your brain will get the idea that it is **study time**.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Answer the following questions about yourself—truthfully!

If you reply truthfully, you will have learned something about your work rhythm which will be useful when you come to plan your weekly study timetable.

- How often in an hour do you feel the need to get up and stretch your legs while you are reading a text book?
- At what time of the day do you work best?
 - (a) morning
 - (b) afternoon
 - (c) evening
 - (d) late at night
- Write down the hours when you can study at the same time every day in the week (meal times and travel times do not count!)

(From Monash University Counselling Service, Sponsored by Monash University Bookshops.)

2. Location

In the same way as you need to teach your brain regular study times, you need to establish a connection between location and study. It does not really matter where you study (some people actually study best when there is some noise around them, others prefer quiet). The point is that your brain needs to know that this location is where you work and think and write assignments. When you sit down at this location your brain goes into “study mode”. Your brain needs routine in order to work at maximum potential.

Answer the following questions about the place where you work—be honest!

- Which are the places where you feel happiest working?
- Why do you prefer these places?

3. Study Periods

Schedule study periods of no more than two hours. Make sure you take a 20 minute break in between. Take a 5 minute break within each hour period. Take a short walk.

4. Give yourself a holiday!

If you have been studying efficiently all week it is reasonable to give yourself a holiday. Schedule fun time into your weekly timetable. See a movie. Go and see a friend. Your brain needs relaxation time too.

Exercise, Time Management Quiz

Answer the following questions honestly. You should know the answers without thinking too much!

1. When are you most alert

- (a) early morning?
- (b) middle of the day?
- (c) early evening?
- (d) late at night?

2. Do you prefer to study

- (a) in complete silence, by yourself?
- (b) in the middle of a group of people who are also studying?
- (c) by yourself, but with music on?
- (d) never?

3. Do you study best

- (a) for long uninterrupted stretches? How long?
- (b) in short bursts, interspersed with breaks?
- (c) after exercising?
- (d) before exercising?
- (e) horizontally?

4. When you study, do you like

- (a) to drink coffee, tea, water?
- (b) to eat?
- (c) neither?

5. Do you have a place to study at home which is

- (a) away from the household's busy areas?
- (b) big enough to hold all you need for study?
- (c) well-lit?
- (d) well-ventilated? at the right temperature?

Exercise, Time Management Quiz (cont'd)

6. How do you motivate yourself to complete study tasks

- (a) rewards for small/big achievements?
- (b) punishments for "failures"?
- (c) trick yourself into starting and continuing?

7. How do you organise what you have to study

- (a) according to long term plan?
- (b) to achieve short-term goals?
- (c) what ever comes up?

8. How do you solve your study problems

- (a) ask your academic adviser?
- (b) talk to your friends?
- (c) do nothing and panic?

(From A. Bartlett, S. Holzknrecht and A. Cumming Thom, 1999, pp. 117-123).

Golden Rule 2, Set Yourself Goals

Studying efficiently is all about rewarding yourself too. It's no good telling yourself that you will 'finish this 8,000 word assignment today' when you haven't started it yet. But it is quite reasonable to complete a section of the assignment. This is certainly achievable. When you have done it you can also reward yourself by having a rest.

Limit your study to things that you can easily get completed. **Set achievable sub-goals.** In that way you will always finish what you set out to do. You will therefore feel happier with your progress. This provides incentive to keep going.

We often see students who have trouble reading academic articles and writing assignments. Usually they feel overwhelmed by their tasks. However, don't think: 'I have to finish this 90 page article today'. Think: 'I have to finish this 10 page section today'. Reward yourself when you finish it. Have a break. Then set another goal. (See the **Study and Research Helpsheets: How to Read**).

Golden Rule 3, Knowing Yourself

It is no good writing out a timetable that you will not be able to keep. It has to reflect your personality and habits. Assess your own shortcomings as well as your own strengths. For instance, if you work best early in the morning, it is best to study then, and not late at night when you cannot concentrate. This is very obvious of course but it is frequently forgotten. Don't be influenced by your friends and their habits. A study timetable is a very individual thing.

Study Personalities

There are three kinds of study “personalities”:

The **Methodical**: These students don’t need this Helpsheet. They are:

- systematic
- well-planned
- organised and consistent

The **Spasmodic**: These students can occasionally do good work but their study skills are risky. They are:

- highly unpredictable
- prone to spasms/bursts of creative work
- never consistent

The **Sporadic**: These students are most common. Most of us are like this. They are:

- occasionally productive
- irregular in one’s commitment
- sometimes consistent

Be aware of these typical study personalities and know yourself.

Design a Yearly Planner

In addition to designing a weekly planner you need a yearly (or semester) planner. Pick up a **yearly wall calendar** from the Bookshop. Record all your assignment deadlines. The work back about 3-4 weeks for each assignment and write: “Begin Assignment X now”. Allow time to do research for your assignments. Wall planners are better than hand held diaries as you can see at a glance when assignments are due and when you need to commence each one. Often assignments for different subjects are due on the same day. Recording start and submission days helps you juggle multiple commitments.

An excerpt from a yearly planner is given below.

March	6	7	8 Start Market essay	9
10	11	12 Start Macro essay	---	
	29 Edit Macro Essay	30	Market Essay Due	
April	1 Prep for Finance test	2	3 Plan for presentation	4 Read book chapter for Eco tute
10	11 Finance Test	12 Macro Essay due	13	

Keep the following in mind:

- Use a wall planner not a pocket planner. (With pocket planners there is the danger of turning a page and seeing an important deadline before you have done anything about it!)
- Put wall planner where you see it every day, e.g., above your desk (putting a second one in the toilet is not a bad idea!)
- Plot in all assignment deadlines, presentations, etc
- Work back 3-4 weeks and write "Begin assignment 1 NOW", etc. Do this for all assessed tasks
- Work to the plan. If the plan cannot be kept start another one.
- Tick off tasks accomplished as you do them (e.g., **edit** essay for Management; **redraft** essay for Economics).

Strategic Planning

In addition to designing a weekly and yearly planner you need to be strategic about your planning. We began this Helpsheet noting that almost all students wait to receive an essay topic from their lecturers before commencing. This leads to:

- Problems gaining access to some references in the library
- Trouble accessing student services
- Needing to obtain extensions or hand in sub-standard work

You can start research for essays even before semester begins. All it takes is a little planning and resourcefulness. This means you can use mid-semester and pre-semester breaks productively.

- Look at the subject handbook/reading pack well before time. Summer semester packs and reading packs from the previous year are available now (see the Reserve Collection in the Library)
- Many of the reading packs have the assignment subjects listed and often the essay questions.
- Sometimes the research assignment topics do not change greatly (for example, in the subject International Business you will have to write an assignment on Michael Porter's theory of five forces. The essay question might vary from year-to-year but the topic is essentially the same).
- Even if essay topics change you can still do preliminary research and use your research as part of different assignments (it is often surprising how different work can be integrated into different subjects).
 - Begin research for assignments NOW!
 - Find resources NOW!
 - Plan your time NOW!
 - Plan your arguments and ideas NOW!
 - Write NOW! (you can always make something better later)

A Note on Procrastination

Most students experience problems getting words on paper. This is called procrastination. Here are some tips for overcoming it:

- If you are working on a major paper aim for 200 words of quality work per day. That's easy! (This equals 1400 words per week). In two weeks you have enough for a standard length essay.
- Don't stop writing until you have reached target or "pick-up" point (that is, finish a small section before stopping for a break).
- Free write. Write without structure just getting ideas down on paper
- Then edit work ruthlessly (leave aside for a week and come back to it) (See **Study and Research Helpsheet: Editing and Proofreading**)
- Form study groups and swap work. This gives you the motivation to write.

If you follow these suggestions you will inevitably be well-planned and organised.

A Note on Preparing for Exams

Many students wait until just before the SwotVac period before preparing for an exam. Then they try to re-read the textbook. This is an example of very bad planning: 1. No-one can read a textbook just prior to an exam; 2. It is impossible to understand the material this way. Try this strategy instead:

- As you read take notes. You need to do this on a daily basis.
- Re-read regularly and transfer the notes to small cards
- Staple and sort cards under headings (keep catalogued in a box)
- Read the cards—not the textbook—prior to the exam (update if necessary)
- Carry the cards with you on the everywhere. Read them when you have a spare minute (e.g., on the bus)
- Do previous exam papers under timed conditions
- Just prior to the exam revise your card notes again.

See the **Study and Research Helpsheet: Exam Preparation**.

In Summary

It is expected that you have acquired self-discipline, self-reliance and good planning skills as an undergraduate. Postgraduate study tests these skills.

Reference

Bartlett, A., Holzknrecht, S. and Cumming Thom, A. *Preparing Students for Graduate Study: To Hit the Ground Running*, Asia Pacific Press: National Centre for Development Studies, ANU: Canberra, 1999, pp. 117-12.3.

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