

How to Reduce Procrastination

Procrastination is the act of choosing to do something that is less of a priority in order to avoid tasks that are more challenging or unpleasant. It is in fact a coping mechanism or a temporary relief for longer term problems. Procrastination is much more than a time management problem. The first step to overcoming procrastination is to understand your reasons for delaying the tasks. Below are some concrete strategies to understand and manage procrastination.

- 1. Awareness is the first step towards overcoming procrastination.** Below are some tasks on which students procrastinate about and some common reasons for procrastination. Take a moment to think about which tasks you procrastinate on, and why. Try to understand if there is a pattern. Your patterns might vary based on the subject area, time of the day, day of the week, etc. Make a note of these observations; the devil is in the details.

AT A GLANCE

1. [Be aware of when and why you procrastinate](#)
2. [Identify strategies](#)
3. [Create an action plan](#)
4. [Expect challenges, create implementation intentions](#)
5. [Make excuses difficult to pursue](#)
6. [Think of your current self and future self as two different people](#)
7. [Practice self-compassion](#)

Common areas of procrastination	Common reasons for procrastination
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Going to class ○ Reading before class ○ Studying after class ○ Starting homework early ○ Starting to study early for tests/exams ○ Planning ahead for assignments and papers ○ Using resources ○ Studying with peers ○ Talking to an instructor ○ Talking to a TA/Al ○ Making an advising appointment ○ Taking a break 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ I don't feel like doing it ○ But I don't know how ○ I don't have the prerequisite knowledge to do this ○ This stuff is too hard ○ But what if I don't do it well? ○ This stuff is plain boring ○ I waited too long to do it ○ You can't make me do it

2. **Identify strategies that might work you.** Once you've identified where and why you procrastinate, the next step is to identify the strategies to overcome challenges. Below is a non-exhaustive list of strategies for specific reasons.

Reasons for Procrastination	Strategies/Self-talk to overcome procrastination
I don't feel like doing it/ You can't make me do it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your long-term goals? • How does completing this task/course help you achieve your long-term goals? • Remember that your foundations need to be strong; if they are not where they need to be, in the future you might have to spend time relearning the basics to pursue your passion • What new skills will you gain by completing this task? • What are the consequences of not doing this task? • Can you pair up with a friend to find the motivation to this?
But I don't know how	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get help from your instructor, TA, tutor, mentor, friends • Understand what is expected of you • Research suggests that we tend to overestimate difficulty of a task. Starting something small might make us feel differently about the task and ourselves. • Start small, start now. Work on just the 'next thing;' experience a small win and build momentum.
I don't know the prerequisite information to do the task/ This stuff is too hard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources are available to you through the course? • GET HELP! (from an instructor, TA, tutor, mentor, friend, etc.) • Talk to your instructor • Talk to your academic advisor • Take advantage of online resources to build your foundations. • Remind yourself of a task that you found challenging in the past. What are the strategies you used then? Which of those strategies can be used now to motivate you to practice and perceive? • Research suggests that we tend to overestimate difficulty of a task. Starting something small might make us feel differently about the task and ourselves.
But what if I don't do it well?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind yourself of the times when you were doubtful, but you worked hard and succeeded. What are the strategies you used then? Which of those strategies can be used now in completing the current task?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redirect your self-critical voice to focus on the learning process itself instead of the outcome. How do the skills/concepts that you learn from this task relate to your long-term goals? • Research suggests that we tend to overestimate difficulty of a task. Starting something small might make us feel differently about the task and ourselves. • Start small, start now. Work on just the ‘next thing’, experience a small win and build momentum.
This stuff is plain boring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study with a friend; form a study group. Divide tasks among study group members. Being responsible (in part) for the learning of your team might force you to stay on task • Find a tutor/mentor • How is the topic relevant to current affairs? Talk to the instructor or graduate assistants. Talking with experts in the field might help you see the material differently. • How does this task/skill set/subject help you achieve your long-term goals?
I waited too long to do it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did you wait too long? Do any of the reasons above sound familiar? If yes, read through the respective strategies. • Make a plan ahead of time. Add all deadlines, exams, homework to your planner. Research shows that making a plan increases the likelihood of one completing the task as opposed to spontaneity. For more information about plotting your schedule, check out the Learning Center’s “How to Plot Your Schedule” document. • For goals that don’t have set deadlines or are further away, create your own deadlines and establish smaller goals that act as steps towards the larger goal. For help with this, check out this resource.

3. **Create an action plan.** Once you’ve done some thinking about the reasons you procrastinate about, ask yourself some reflective questions to help you make an action plan.
- Do I need to adjust my timeline/schedule?
 - When/where should I study? When am I most productive?
 - Where am I most effective when studying (dorm room, library, etc.)?
 - Can I focus if I study with friends?
 - Do I need to ask for help?
 - Will a rewards/punishment system work? What “if-then” rewards motivate you?

Based on the information you’ve gathered about yourself make an action plan. Below is an example of an action planning grid.

Task that you procrastinate often	Why do you procrastinate?	What do you do instead? (your commonly used excuses)	What's your strategy to overcome procrastination?

- 4. Predict and expect challenges while implementing your plan.** The third column in the planning grid above will list some of your roadblocks. You'd want to write out implementation intentions to have a talk with yourself in the moment while battling procrastination.

For example, if one of your excuses is to hang out with friends to push off working on a writing assignment, your implementation intention would say, "If I decide to hang out with my friends instead of working on the paper, I will tell myself that if I work on this now, I won't feel guilty when I hang out with them over the weekend." This is all a reflective process; some implementation intentions might work better than others for you. You might want to choose what matters to you the most. You know yourself best. The key is to anticipate and know what you want to talk yourself into.

- 5. Make your excuses more difficult to pursue.** For example, if one of your excuses is checking social media, make it difficult to access by using website blockers and making the passwords challenging. On the other hand, you can also make the tasks that you want to focus on more accessible. For example, planning to work on a paper with a friend you don't want to disappoint.
- 6. Think of the "current you" and the "future you" as two different individuals.** Think about what putting off assignments or deadlines will do to the future you's stress level and quality of work, and how it will affect other goals/deadlines you have set.
- 7. Practice self-compassion.** Research suggests that people who procrastinate chronically have high stress and low self-compassion levels. Cultivating self-compassion might help decrease psychological distress and increase productivity. A study conducted in 2010 suggests that students who forgave themselves for procrastinating were able to reduce procrastination in the future.

Additional Resources:

https://www.mcgill.ca/counselling/files/counselling/20_tips_to_reduce_academic_procrastination_0.pdf

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ft0dTFYBtU>

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