

Time Management & Productivity Strategies

The key to successful time management in college is to **plan ahead**. There is no perfect “one size fits all” strategy for staying organized and budgeting your time, so you may need to experiment a bit to find a system that works for you. Here are some evidence-based strategies to get you started:

1. **Use a planner (electronic or hard copy) to stay organized.** Schedule your routine commitments, such as classes and extracurricular activities, and use the remaining time to schedule time for studying and homework. It also helps to write in office hours for your instructors, help desk hours, and academic mentoring sessions so you know when help is available in case you need it.
2. **Make planning a habit.** Set aside a small amount of time each day, or a larger chunk of time once a week, to create a to-do list and schedule for upcoming tasks. By laying this foundation, you’ll be better prepared to make slight adjustments when unexpected things arise. Planning ahead will also help to eliminate stress from “trying to find time” to study, playing catch-up on homework, and cramming for tests.
3. **Engage in self-reflection to identify when you are most productive.** For example, if you are most focused/productive in the afternoon, try scheduling your most difficult tasks in the afternoon, rather than earlier or later in the day when they will take longer and require more energy. Everyone is different, so find what works for you.
4. **Create to-do lists with set deadlines.** Having a list of action items for the day can help you stay on task and increase your productivity. Many students report that crossing something off their to-do list gives them a sense of satisfaction and keeps them motivated.

Ideally, you should prioritize the items on your to-do list, so you know where to focus your time and energy and which tasks you can afford to put off until later if you run out of time. Here is an example of a prioritized to-do list that you can use to plot your schedule (see tip #6).

To-Do Item	Time Needed	Deadline	Priority Level
Reading (prep for class discussion)	30 minutes	3:00pm Monday 4/13	1 2 3 4
Slides for anthropology group project	2 hours	Next meeting 4/16	1 2 3 4
Study for exam 3	3 hours	Monday 4/20 (Exam Wednesday 4/22)	1 2 3 4

Click here to download a [4-column to-do list worksheet](#).

5. **Prioritize tasks/duties/meetings based on importance and urgency** using the quadrant method (also called the Eisenhower Matrix):

	Importance	
Urgency	Important, Urgent (Do it now!)	Not Important, but Urgent (Delegate, if possible)
	Important, but Not Urgent (Schedule a time to do it)	Not Important, Not Urgent (Postpone or discard from the to-do list)

Urgency is fairly self-explanatory; a paper due tomorrow morning is more urgent than an assignment due the following night. Importance is a more subjective continuum; consider which tasks are likely to have the greatest impact on your life, grades, etc. The key to a functional matrix is to put no more than 2-3 items in the “do it now” section.

6. **Break large tasks down into smaller, more manageable chunks.** For example, writing a paper can seem like a daunting task; you know it will take a considerable amount of time to complete, and it can be hard to figure out where to start. Instead of putting “write paper” on your to-do list, you could break down the assignment like this:

To-Do Item	Time Needed
Brainstorm paper topic	1 hour
Research	2 hours
Outline paper	1 hour
Write introduction	1 hour
Write conclusion	1 hour
First Draft	2 hours
Take to Writing Center	1 hour
Revise Draft	2 hours

At first, it may be difficult to judge how long each of these sub-tasks will take you to complete, but that skill will improve with time. The first few times you use this method, try to budget more time than you think you’ll need.

7. **Plot your schedule on a calendar.** This can be a useful alternative or supplement to using a planner, to help give you a “big picture” view of the week ahead. Begin by adding your fixed weekly commitments (classes, extracurriculars, etc.) to your calendar, and then plot your to-do list items in the white spaces between them. Your schedule should look something like this:

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	Time	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
2	8:00 AM							Sleeping in
3	9:00 AM		Class		Class			
4	10:00 AM	Paper - Brainst		Class		Class	Class	
5	11:00 AM							
6	12:00 PM							
7	1:00 PM	Anthro - Read 2						
8	2:00 PM	chapters	Paper -		Paper - Intro			
9	3:00 PM		Research				Class	
10	4:00 PM	PLTL		Paper - Outline	Paper - Concl	Orgo - TA hrs		
11	5:00 PM		Calc -					
12	6:00 PM		Problem sets	Calc - Problem	Class	Paper - First	Paper - Writ. Cent.	
13	7:00 PM		sets					
14	8:00 PM	Orgo - Review	Club Meeting	Orgo - Study			Calc - Problem	Orgo - Acad.
15	9:00 PM	past assign.			w/ friends	Mentroing		Revisions
16	10:00 PM							
17	11:00 PM							Anthro - Begin
18	12:00 AM							research

Check out the Learning Center's ["How to Plot Your Schedule" guide](#) for more information.

- Reward yourself for completing tasks on time.** When creating a schedule, leave some time after each task to take a break and enjoy a short, meaningful reward, such as a snack, a few minutes to check social media, watching one episode of a TV show, etc. If you don't complete your task in the amount of time you allotted (because of distractions like enjoying your reward early), you will lose your scheduled reward.

This is a self-control skill that takes time to build, so stick with it even if you struggle at first. For more information on methods similar to this, research the Pomodoro Technique.

- Schedule some time to relax – yes, really!** It's not healthy or reasonable to expect yourself to devote every waking minute to academic pursuits and making time for leisure will actually improve your productivity by preventing burnout. After all, college isn't just about academics; it's also a time to build friendships, learn about yourself, engage in the community/world, and prepare for life after graduation.

When you plan out your schedule for the week, purposely set aside some time for fun or relaxation, and take that time commitment just as seriously as you do the others. Scheduling your leisure time can also make it easier to set boundaries and say "no" to other leisure opportunities that may arise, which will help you avoid procrastination.

Additional resources and further reading:

- [The Learning Center Academic Skills Series: Time Management](#) [video]
- [Planning When Deadlines are Further Away](#)
- [How to Plot Your Schedule](#)
- [Worksheet: 4-Column To-Do List](#)
- [A Guide to the Pomodoro Technique: College Info Geek](#)
- [Resources and Tools for Students: College Info Geek](#)
- *Time management apps:*
 - [Nozbe](#)
 - [My Life Organized](#)
 - [Rescue Time](#)
 - [OmniFocus](#)
 - [MyStudyPlan](#)

References:

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