

How to Get More Studying Done in Less Time

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One of the most frequent problems expressed by college students is difficulty in time management. All of us at one time or another find ourselves procrastinating – putting things off to the last minute. In fact, the typical college routine with final exams held at a specified period, term paper, deadlines, etc., breeds procrastination. If you were to graph the actual amount of time you spend studying, you'd probably find a rapid rise a few hours to many hours just prior to an exam or other deadline. In fact, college students learn quickly to meet deadlines if they are to survive at all in the system. Yet many find cramming or working so intensively painful and guilt producing. They make resolutions to spread out their work and study on a regular schedule "next time," but fail to sustain this initial motivation and end up in the same last-minute predicament.

Studying like many other activities is subject to Parkinson's Law – studying expands to fit the available time. If you have four hours to study for a course, you'll probably spend four or even five hours reading. Many students find that they work more effectively when they're holding down jobs or carrying a full schedule so that their study time is limited. They have to get more out of each hour they have to devote to studying. Many times they are surprised that their grades improve when studying time is scarce. For example, if you have all day Saturday to prepare for an examination or catch up on your reading, you're likely to sleep late, find excuses for not getting started until your anxiety rises to a point where you have to do something and find that there are only two or three hours left in the day. Courses you find dull or boring often get postponed in favor of those you find more interesting and you may end up cramming the night before hoping to "luck out" on the exam. This will practically guarantee that you'll develop exam panic, if you're prone to become tense on exams.

The following questions and problems students have in time management and suggestions on how to cope with these are based on psychological learning principles and business management procedures. First, it's important to determine how you spend your time – where does your time go? Many students will sit at a desk for several hours studying but find their minds wandering, they can't concentrate, they reread the same paragraph so that sitting there serves as an anxiety reducing function, i.e., you're serving penance, you're attempting to study, but you're getting little done. Psychologists have found that operant conditioning techniques can be applied to this problem. First, have one place to study that is relatively clear of distractions that will prevent your concentrating. Second, when you sit down to study at the desk or whatever place you select, study. When you're aware that your mind is wandering, that you're daydreaming, that you're stuck on a problem, or that you're wheel spinning – stop kidding yourself, you aren't learning. Get up and do something else. In other words, condition yourself to concentrate when you're sitting at your desk and only sit at your desk when you're concentrating.

If you combine this approach with setting specific goals for each study hour and a system of rewards and punishments for yourself, you may find studying more productive. By setting objectives, we mean determining ahead of time what you expect to accomplish within a given study period. This does not mean "I've gotta get through three chapters in history, how they relate to each other and the major underlying events that accompany them." In a course in botany you might set your goal for a given hour as "Identifying the seven major trends in plant evolution and characteristics of each stage."

Where does your time go?

It's important to assess how you actually spend your time, and typically most of us estimate poorly how we use our time. To get an accurate estimate, you need to find some means of detaching your observational self from your operating self. One way to do this is to keep simple operating records. Another way is to have someone observe and record your activities. However, it's usually more practical for most of us to do

our own recording. Then we need a yardstick to evaluate our utilization of time. A schedule is attached where you can record activities and accomplishments during your study time. This might give you a start in observing yourself more objectively.

Another approach is to run down through checklists of difficult points where time slips away, and the following list provides some ideas how to do this.

1. **Do you lose time getting started?** Many students have problems in getting down to the books even though they set aside time to study. A related problem is “getting warmed up.” Some subjects apparently require greater warm-up time than others. (For example, studying a foreign language – learning vocabulary, translating and working exercises may require more time than reading through a history chapter as far as warm-ups are concerned.)
 - Determine the time period that you are most effective and most alert and attempt to schedule your study time then. Some students function better in the early morning while others are more effective late at night. Forcing yourself to study late at night if you’re an early morning type leads to fatigue and wheel spinning. Setting unreasonable goals like “I’ll get up at 6:30AM on Saturday and start studying” makes for difficulties unless you can stick to it, so attempt to be realistic in selecting the times to study. Do not put off studying by rationalizing the importance of other activities? E.g., do you linger over coffee too long, or read the morning paper during your breaks between classes when the time might be better utilized in reviewing or preparing for a lecture? Do you spend unnecessary hours whiling away the time and avoiding studying?
2. **Do you lose time through disorganization?** Are you uncertain as to what you’re going to accomplish in your study period? Do you try to handle too many kinds of activities or cover too many different work problems for a given evening? Do you grab the first book that’s handy rather than systematically planning what you’re going to accomplish and what courses you will study first? Often it’s desirable to study the most difficult or boring courses first and then after you’ve completed your goals within a specified time, reward yourself by turning to the ones that you find more enjoyable. If you like to read the newspaper, use that as a reward after you’ve completed the toughest chemistry problems.
3. **Do you lose time through diversion?** Do you sacrifice prime working time with personal diversion? The way to handle this is to set priorities in budgeting your time. Do you use prime morning hours when you’re most alert to do the laundry vs. going to the laundromat after classes between 4 and 5PM when you’re less likely to be motivated for maximal studying effectiveness? Budget your time for priorities. Screen them ruthlessly. Apply standards of values. This is what the busy executive does. He sets priorities and accomplishes the important things first and then manages to work in the significant details but doesn’t spend the major part of his time on the irrelevancies.
4. **Do you lose time through involvement?** Do you dig too deep into factual research and the pursuit of details after having already obtained the important key facts? Do you work so long on a problem that you are mentally wheel spinning and getting nowhere? Do you know when to stop? If you are fatigued, it’s better to change to some other activity rather than to continue forcing yourself like whipping a tired horse to keep going. If you are stuck on a problem, change activities and then return later. You’ll find you can usually solve it more quickly rather than wasting 2 or 3 hours sitting there fussing over it. Establish criteria as to how deeply you need to go into a given assignment. If you’re worried, anxious, or insecure about a subject you are likely to overdo the studying. You try to cram all available facts helter-skelter into your head, hoping for the best rather than systematically planning to get the main ideas and enough supporting details to enable you to understand and answer exam questions.
5. **Do you lose time in paperwork?** Do you have trouble locating your notes and books so you can integrate reading with your lecture notes? Do you screen out your reading materials to unnecessary or unproductive matter? Many students faced with long reading lists start plodding through book #1 and finish two out of six books. Then, they feel guilty that they haven’t managed to get through the others but give up and trust luck to help them succeed in the exams. Developing effective skimming and

scanning techniques will enable you to get the major concepts from all of the books and then selectively decide which are necessary to study in depth and read more carefully. If you can skim for main ideas and then review them carefully but selectively, you'll be effective and retain more. If you practice rapid reading techniques to improve both your speed and comprehension while putting pressure on yourself, you'll be able to get more ideas in less time.

6. **To get writing done in the time available, do you make some sample outlines for reports or term papers?** When answering essay questions, do you take a few minutes to jot down the major points you're going to cover? Do you make more detailed outlines for your major writing tasks? Do you have an identifiable goal in writing the thesis you're attempting to prove or the major concept clearly in mind before you start writing? Do you get to the point, simply and directly?
7. **In paperwork, do you eliminate work done out of habit which no longer serves any useful purpose?** For example, copying down from the textbook to your notebook all of the major terms or concepts and then retyping all your class notes may be a habit that takes too much of your time. Is it really necessary? Can you streamline your studying by cutting out nonessentials? Can you combine records for example, in your lecture notebook leave every other page blank so that you can make notes from your text reading to fill in the gaps or to elaborate on important points.

Summary

Time is the greatest asset of the college student. Time passes regardless of how we use it. Your challenge should be to obtain the greatest return from your study time by proper division and sequencing of tasks. More effort should be spent on organizing and preparing your objectives and tasks, creative work and productive work. Each of these must be balanced or your productivity will suffer. To increase your productive study time then, you've got to accomplish the detailed indirect activities more quickly and effectively and eliminate time slippages in all activities.

Time usage schedule

1. Determine your sub-goals, e.g., concepts to be mastered in each course, outlines and drafts to complete for term papers or problems to complete.
2. Set time limits for each goal. Work against time to complete your goals.
3. Record the amount of time actually spent to complete each activity.