

## **Improving Time Management and Organization**

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Three Key Time Management Concepts to Consider:

### **1. Saving and Making Time**

If you think about it, there are three key ways to be more productive - learning how to do a task in less time, using time for a task you otherwise would not have used productively, and delegating /sharing the task with someone else. (Delegating is a pretty risky strategy when it comes to college studying; however, it isn't impossible if you have a reliable study partner/group!) A lot of the strategies we will discuss are related to the first two ways.

### **2. Time Compounding**

If I ask you about how much additional time you could make available to study each day, what would be a good guess? 1 hour? 30 minutes? 10 minutes? Most of us can't find an extra hour! But what about an extra 10 or 15 minutes to devote to studying? Sounds reasonable, but would it make much of a difference? SURE - 10 minutes a day times 6 days a week is 1 extra hour of study time. Assuming you have a class that has 3 tests over a 15 week session, that would be 5 extra hours to study for each test! Sounds better now, doesn't it? It is likely that you can find little bits of time throughout your day to turn into valuable study time - they will add up and pay big dividends (get it -time compounding?!).

### **3. Memory Power**

You know what often happens as soon as you learn something for the first time - you start to lose it! In many courses, your ability to recall information is vital to your success in a course. So, what does this have to do with managing your time? Think about it this way - THE LONGER YOU WAIT after the first time you learn something to go back over it to make sure it is still in your head and makes sense, THE MORE TIME IT WILL TAKE to do the task! See the connection?

Eight Key Time Management Principles to Consider:

### **1. Prioritize Your Tasks**

Many times we are so busy we forget to look at the big picture and ask ourselves "is this the best thing to be doing now?" For me, this is one of the hardest tasks (along with breaking down large tasks into smaller ones - see below). I know I'm working hard and getting a lot

## **2. Develop Routines**

It is true for most of us that anything that becomes a routine takes less time and is more likely to get done (think about your routines for bedtime, cleaning up after meals, doing the lawn, when you first get to work, or get ready to leave work, etc.). Whether related to studying in a traditional course or completing a

## **7. Break up Large Tasks**

When you have lots of smaller tasks and a few larger ones, it can be hard to get to the big ones. You may realize that the large task requires more than one or two hours and be thinking that at some later point you will try to set aside a whole day; the result may be that the task gets put off. If you can break the large task into smaller, “sub-tasks”, you might be able to pick away at it in more manageable bites. If you take a little time to do a task analysis, you might be able to break the task down and start to work on it right away. This is true for large projects, papers, and even studying for larger exams. You can make a list of the steps involved, the estimated time for each step, and a sub-deadline date for each step. (One key, from my experience, is to be very specific and detailed in your description of the tasks in each step.) Now, you can make one step at a time an “A” priority item, make progress, and feel a sense of satisfaction as you check off the steps one at a time.

## **8. Use Little Bits of Time**

The last time I was in the doctor’s office, I waited about 15 minutes until I got into the examining room and about another 25 minutes until I actually saw the doctor. Rather than being annoyed (like I was the last time), I planned ahead and brought a professional journal with me. I read 2 articles and didn’t mind the half-hour wait. The key was in recognizing when those little bits of time are likely to occur and having prepared so I had something beneficial to do. So many times we have to wait: for the bus, for the pasta water to boil, for the teacher to show up in the classroom, etc. Remember the time compounding concept? Those little bits can really add up! Imagine if you had 5 minutes each day to review a key concept you learned earlier that day or the day before. The way to make these little bits useful (even 3 or 4 minutes) is to have something “ready to go” so when you go: “Aha! Here’s a little bit.” You can dive right in. If you have to look for something to review at that point, you will lose precious time. So, have a pack of study cards in your pocket, put a sticky note in your textbook when you see an important chart or a good set of review questions, etc. and you’ll be set for using the little bits of “waiting time” that inevitably come up.

### **Some Key Organization Techniques to Consider:**

For many people, organizing activities are worthwhile because they save time and aggravation. If you can't find something you need to be able to sit down to study (like the book, your notes, the assignment, your pen, etc.), it wastes your precious time and may wreck your attitude as well. If, by the time you actually get started on the task, you’re already frustrated, how likely is it you will perform at a peak level?

We are all comfortable with different levels of organization. The following ideas and materials are offered to you based on my experience and the experience of a lot of students over the years.

### **On Keeping Track of Your Tasks, Events, etc.:**

Many people keep some kind of weekly or monthly planner with them. Some keep track of events, meetings, etc. on a home calendar. Still others keep everything in their head. Again, everyone is different and has different needs. The question is: “Is your system for keeping track of things working well?” Are you finding that your system saves you time and hassles or wastes time and creates problems?

Many people (students and others) find that one key is to have all components of their system together in one place. Keeping your calendar, your to-do lists, your assignments, etc. in one place saves time. A second key is to carry your system with you most of the time. (To that end, you might look at the size of your organizing system to see if a pocket/purse-sized system makes sense for you.) Nothing fancy is needed; a portfolio with pockets or a notebook (binder) will work. A trip to a store like Staples or Office Max is a great way to see what is available and to find materials that make sense for you. Also, your computer, (at home or work) may have scheduling/organizing software, which lets you custom design and print forms (including calendar pages). More and more students are using their cell phones or tablet as their planner and appointment reminder; many free “apps” are available.

For most people it makes sense to have a space you can set up and leave as you wish. Often, I hear students say they need a bigger space than their small desk. I, too, need to be able to spread things out. I encourage students to use plywood sheets, card tables, etc. to provide themselves with the extra workspace they need. Some students have taken over a spare bedroom, attic, etc. so they can have a larger, private space.

Again, a small file cabinet can also be a good investment to help with organization (you can get one with a lock if you are worried about your things disappearing). A small bookshelf can be a big help, too.

Here are a few other thoughts about your workspace, related to improving your performance. There are many factors to consider when trying to optimize your study area. Light, heat, fresh air, noise, visual stimuli are all relevant factors to some of us. Think about which ones affect you and try to do what you can to control them. I have a small (9") fan in my 10' by 10' office - it really keeps things cooler and keeps the air from getting stale when the door is closed (our windows don't open). Lots of people like to have two sources of light to help eliminate glare. When I work on the dining room table at home (I know, I know), I have to bring a floor lamp in from the living room, otherwise the glare is unbearable (funny how it never bothers me when I'm eating). I know students who use earplugs to control noise; there are cheap foam ones you can get from sporting goods stores. Others use music to filter out distractions (music with a consistent beat, few changes in loudness, and no lyrics have been shown to work best). You get the idea - small changes in your workspace can pay big dividends by improving how well you learn and how long you can stay on task.