

Getting organised

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Managing your time

The time you spend at university will be taken up with a variety of study-related tasks including, for example, attending lectures, seminars and workshops, reading, gathering information from the library and the internet, and writing drafts.

As well as study-related tasks, you will have a number of other important commitments, such as employment, family, friends and a social life. It is important, therefore, to develop an effective approach to time management so that you can meet all your deadlines and commitments. Managing your time is the starting point for any serious activity and one of the keys to success!

Begin to organise your time by finding out which modules on your course require you to complete work, and when this work is due (the deadline). If you are not sure, ask your tutor and/or consult your programme handbook. Consider constructing a table or wall chart which will help you to visualise your long-term commitments. For example:

Figure 1: Assignment schedule

Semester	Module name / code	Brief details of assessment	Deadline	✓
Autumn	European Social Policy / SPA 1234	Oral presentation about welfare state in Britain and France Presentation worth 30% of overall mark	1/11/01 12:00pm	

Once you have met a deadline, make sure you tick the box on the far right to indicate this. Display the table in a prominent place so you will be frequently reminded of your study tasks.

Once you have received your course timetable and are clear about your future deadlines, you are in a good position to begin to plan your daily/weekly schedule. The timetable below is particularly useful for students who feel that they waste time and don't get as much done as they would like. Experiment with it or consider developing your own.

Aim to make it realistic. Allocate more time to those tasks which are uncomfortable or difficult for you. Make sure you leave sufficient time for travelling between university and home, and build-in time for eating, sleeping, employment and socialising.

Figure 2: Daily/weekly Timetable

Wk Commencing.:.....

	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Deadlines
Mon				
Tues				
Wed				
Thu				
Fri				
Sat				
Sun				

Starting early and planning ahead will help you to meet your deadlines more successfully. Quite often just getting started is the hardest part of an assignment. However, there are times when you may do everything you can to avoid studying. The tendency to put things off until a later date is a work-avoidance strategy called procrastination.

Procrastination

Letting your mind wander, welcoming interruptions, getting side-tracked by far less important jobs and taking extended tea and meal-breaks, are all good indicators of procrastination. Low self-esteem can also play a part in procrastination. If you find that you are procrastinating, refer back to the weekly schedule you have established for yourself so that you will be less likely to forget or put-off important tasks.

If you are still finding it difficult to get started, brainstorm what you know. Jot down a few ideas or key words onto a blank piece of paper. Try making a spider-diagram or mind-map (see our study guide on notemaking for more on this). Write the key words or topic in the middle of the page and use lines to make connecting links to other points surrounding and branching out from the central topic.

Tell yourself that you will only work for five minutes. This will get you started and even if you stop after five minutes, you will have completed at least some of your task. Break tasks down into smaller jobs to make them more manageable and set yourself a goal of doing a small task by a specific deadline, attempt to stick to this. You do not have to start at the beginning of the task, you just have to start.

Creating a study environment

Managing your study time is one important aspect of getting organised; creating a suitable study environment is another. The environment in which you study can, to a certain extent, determine the quality and quantity of work you are able to produce. It can also facilitate the deeper concentration required for successfully completing certain study tasks, such as revising for an exam or working on a project.

If you study at home, ensure, as far as possible, that your study space is comfortable, sufficiently private, well-lit and heated, and that you have adequate access to facilities (such as toilets and refreshments) and study materials. If you are unable to create your own space at home, consider alternative locations, such as the campus/public library, empty classrooms, or at a friend's house.

It is important to consider not only where you study, but when. Do you prefer to study in the evening, perhaps when the children are in bed, or are you a morning person, only able to concentrate before lunch? The key is to practise different strategies until you find one that you feel comfortable with. Experiment by working in different places at different times - you may be surprised at how flexible you can be in your approach to studying and learning.

Stress management

Stress can be thought of as mental, emotional, or physical strain or tension, and a normal part of everyday living. Experiencing stress as a student at university is extremely common. Although a mild degree of stress can be helpful in keeping you motivated, excessive levels over a long period of time can damage your health. Think about what causes you to experience stress and how it affects your thinking, body, emotions, social life and behaviour.

If you are feeling stressed, manage your workload and your time by prioritising tasks and setting realistic goals according to a timetable you have established for yourself. Try to be positive. Tell yourself that you can cope rather than how difficult everything is. However, if you start to feel overwhelmed, there are a number of sources of help that you can turn to, including your family, friends, work colleagues, fellow students or professional counselling services. Refer to the Student Handbook for details of various sources of help and advice, whether for personal or study-related issues. If you would like to discuss your time management in more detail, you can make an appointment with one of the Learning Development team.

Recommended reading

Levin, P. (2007) *Skilful time management*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

Northedge, A. (2005) *The Good Study Guide*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Race, P. (2007) *How to Get a Good Degree: making the most of your time at university* (2nd ed.)
Maidenhead: Open University Press.

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