

# Procrastination

Everyone procrastinates, but that doesn't mean it's inevitable.

**You can stop procrastinating today.** But you might need some help understanding why you do it and how you can stop. Here, you can learn why procrastination happens, find some easy tips to stop procrastinating now, and arm yourself with useful anti-procrastination tools.

## Why we procrastinate

**Because we're wired to seek instant gratification.** Chances are good that you have Facebook, Instagram, and/or Twitter pulled up in another window on the device you're using to read these very words. And it's so tempting to keep checking it, right? There's a reason for that: research suggests that instant gratification has a stronger effect on our behavior than delayed gratification.

**Because we think we should be perfect.** Procrastination and perfectionism often go hand in hand. Perfectionists tend to procrastinate because they expect so much of themselves, and they are scared about whether they can meet those high standards. Perfectionists sometimes give a half-hearted effort in order to maintain the belief that they could have written a great paper if only they had tried their best. They are afraid of trying their best and still producing a paper that is just okay.

**Because we don't like what we need to do.** You may procrastinate on writing because you don't like to re-read what you have written; you hate writing a first draft and then being forced to evaluate it. By procrastinating, you ensure that you don't have time to read over your work, thus avoiding that uncomfortable moment.

**Because we're too busy.** When we overbook our calendars, it's easy to avoid the things we don't want to do, even if we need to do them.

## How to tame procrastination

### Take an inventory

Keeping track of when you procrastinate with a weekly planner can help you figure out when you procrastinate and can help you stop the behavior. It's easy to do: whenever you procrastinate, mark it down. Think about clues that can alert you: for example, a nagging voice in your head, a visual image of what you are avoiding or the consequences of not doing it, physical ailments (stomach tightness, headaches, muscle tension), inability to concentrate, or inability to enjoy what you are doing.

### Create a productive environment

If you've made the decision to stop delaying on a particular project, it's critical to find a place to work where you have a chance of getting something done. Your room may not be the place where you're most productive. Libraries offer great places to work. Make sure to find your study space before it's

time to be productive; otherwise, finding the perfect space could turn into a form of procrastination itself!

When you're in a productive space, eliminate digital distractions (see the handout on our website). Pull up the materials you need on your laptop, and turn the Wi-Fi off and put your phone on airplane mode.

## Challenge your myths

Think of a project that you are currently putting off. On one side of a piece of paper, write down all the reasons for your delay. On the other side, argue against the delay.

**Myth #1:** "I can't function in a messy environment. I can't possibly work on this project until I have cleaned my apartment."

**Challenge:** If, when faced with a project, you start piling up prerequisites for all the things you must do before you can possibly start working, consider whether you might in fact be making excuses—in other words, procrastinating.

**Myth #2:** "I do my best work under pressure."

**Challenge:** There are other ways to create pressure for yourself besides waiting until the night before the project is due before you start working on it. You can set a time limit for yourself—for example, "I will write this paragraph in half an hour"—or you can pretend that the assignment is a timed exam. If you do this a week or two before the assignment is due, you'll have a draft in plenty of time to revise and edit it.

**Myth #3:** "In order to be productive, I must have two uninterrupted hours."

**Challenge:** You can and should work on assignments in one hour blocks (or shorter). This will help you break the task down into smaller pieces, thereby making it seem more manageable. If you know that you can work on one part of the project for one hour, then it won't seem so daunting, and you will be less likely to procrastinate. Some people find, however, that they do need longer blocks of time in order to really produce anything. Therefore, like all of the strategies outlined here, know yourself.

## Break it down

The day you get an assignment, break it up into the smallest possible chunks. When you break a project down, it never has a chance to take on gargantuan proportions in your mind. If you're working on a research paper, for example, you can say to yourself, "Right now, I'm going to write the introduction. That's all, just the introduction!" And you may be more likely to sit down and do that, than you will to sit down and "write the paper." Making a written "to do" or checklist can help.

## Ask for help

Get an anti-procrastination buddy. Tell someone about your work goal and timeline, and ask them to help you determine whether or not your plan is realistic. You can do the same for him or her. Once or

twice a week, email your buddy to report on your progress, and declare your promise for the next week. If, despite your good intentions, you start procrastinating again, don't think, "All is lost!" Instead, talk to your buddy about it. He or she may be able to help you put your slip into perspective and get back on track.

## Learn how to tell time

One of the best ways to combat procrastination is to develop a more realistic understanding of time. Our views of time tend to be fairly unrealistic. "This paper is only going to take me about five hours to write," you think. "Therefore, I don't need to start on it until the night before." What you may be forgetting, however, is that our time is often filled with more activities than we realize. On the night in question, for instance, let's say you go to the gym at 4:45 PM. You work out (1 hour), take a shower and dress (30 minutes), eat dinner (45 minutes), and go to a club meeting (1 hour). By the time you get back to your room to begin work on the paper, it is already 8:00 PM. But now you need to check your email and return a couple of phone calls. It's 8:30 PM. before you finally sit down to write the paper. If the paper does indeed take five hours to write, you will be up until 1:30 in the morning—and that doesn't include the time that you will inevitably spend watching Netflix. And, as it turns out, it takes about five hours to write a first draft of the essay. You have forgotten to allow time for revision, editing, and proofreading. You get the paper done and turn it in the next morning. But you know it isn't your best work, and you are pretty tired from the late night, and so you make yourself a promise: "Next time, I'll start early!"

Apps like [30/30](#) and [Schedule Planner](#) offer great ways to help you manage time.

## Make an "unscheduled"

The next time you have a deadline, try using an unschedule to outline a realistic plan for when you'll work. An unschedule is a weekly calendar of all the ways your time is already accounted for, so you include not only classes but also activities such as meals, exercise, errands, laundry, and socializing. This will give you an outline of the time that you spend doing other things besides studying.

An unschedule will reveal your blank spaces: these are the times to schedule work. By using these as a guide, you'll be able to more accurately predict how much time you can study on any given day. An unschedule might also be a good way to get started on a larger project such as a term paper or an honors thesis. You may think that you have "all semester" to get the writing done, but if you really sit down and map out how much time you have available to work on a daily and weekly basis, you will see that you need to get started sooner, rather than later.

Perhaps most importantly, an unschedule can help you see how you spend your time. You may be surprised at how much (or how little) time you spend on social media and decide to make a change. It's especially important that you build time for fun activities into your unschedule. Otherwise, you might procrastinate because you need time for relaxation.

You can also use the unschedule to record your progress towards your goal. Each time you work on a paper, for example, mark it on the unschedule. One of the most important things you can do to kick the procrastination habit is to reward yourself when you write something, even if that writing is only a little piece of the whole. Seeing your success recorded will help reinforce the productive behavior, and you will feel more motivated to write later in the day or week.

## Set a time limit

Okay, so maybe one of the reasons you procrastinate on working on a particular assignment is because you hate it! You would rather be at the dentist than sitting in front of your desk with this problem set staring you in the face. In that case, it may be helpful to set limits on how much time you will spend working on it before you do something else. While the notation “Must work on Hemingway essay all weekend” may not inspire you to sit down and write, “Worked on Hemingway essay for ½ hour” just might.

A lot of students find the Pomodoro Technique a helpful way to build in breaks. Pomodoro technique is simple: All you do is set a timer for 25 minutes, work during that time, and take a 5-minute break when the timer goes off. Rinse, repeat. It’s a great way of avoiding burnout!

## Practice self-forgiveness

Research suggests that forgiving yourself for procrastinating in the past can help you procrastinate less in the future. It’s a way of acknowledging that procrastination is something you can change. Remember: The past is in the past. Let it go.

## Take a social media hiatus

There are only so many cat pictures you can look at before social media becomes counterproductive. It can be detrimental to your GPA in two ways:

1. By taking up your time: research suggests that hours spent on Facebook are negatively correlated to GPA.
2. By taking up your attention: yet more research suggests that texting while studying interferes with your mental bandwidth and ability to deeply learn material.

What is to be done? You can take a social media hiatus. It’s simple: You can start by swearing off social media for two hours. You’ll be amazed at how many times you automatically move to check Twitter or Instagram. See if you can gradually build your endurance: Can you stay off social media for four hours? A day? A week? If you tame social media, you’ll have loads more time to work, play, and sleep.

## Anti-Procrastination tools

Need some hiatus help? Check out some of the tools below.

- StayFocused: A free extension for Google Chrome (Mac OS X or PC) that lets you limit the amount of time you spend on time-suck sites. You specify sites you want to restrict and set the amount of time you’ll allow yourself to use them. After that point, the extension blocks the sites. If you procrastinate by surfing Wikipedia or social media sites, this would be a great option for you.

- SelfControl: This free app for Mac OS X lets you block sites you set and even email for a set amount of time. If you need an hour (or five!) of totally uninterrupted time, SelfControl makes focus easy.
- Freedom: This app works the same way as SelfControl, but it's compatible with both Mac OS X and Windows.
- Unstuck: Unstuck is a free digital coach to help move you out of "stuck" moments. Feeling stuck in your work? You can head to [unstuck.com](http://unstuck.com) or, if you have an iOS devices, open the Unstuck app to figure out the best strategies for your situation.
- Post-it Notes: One low-tech solution is to leave yourself reminders to work in places you know you'll see (like your bathroom mirror or coffee machine).

## Parting thoughts

As you explore why you procrastinate and experiment with strategies for working differently, don't expect overnight transformation. You developed the procrastination habit over a long period of time; you aren't likely going to break it all at once. But you can change the behavior, bit by bit. If you stop punishing yourself when you procrastinate and start rewarding yourself for your small successes, you will eventually develop new writing habits. And you will get a lot more sleep.

In addition to these tips, check out some of our other handouts and resources to help you with procrastination, such as our handouts on [motivation](#), [distractions](#), and [digital distractions](#).

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