The word “procrastination” comes from the Latin verb procrastinare, meaning “to put off until morning.” Procrastination is one of the most common time management problems. Most of us procrastinate occasionally, putting off difficult or confusing tasks. However, some people are chronic procrastinators.

Procrastination can be a serious problem in college because deadlines can seem far away. This can be a challenge for first-year students who may not have been accustomed to managing their own time in high school. In college, the daytime hours outside of class can be deceptive; it’s easy to feel like you have all the time in the world. And students encounter many opportunities for procrastination, ranging from a roommate’s TV, to loud music from another room, to friends dropping by to socialize. Smart phones can also be big time-wasters.

Procrastination can make it difficult or even impossible to catch up. It can also compromise the quality of your work. In order to manage procrastination, you must first understand the underlying reasons. **Why do people procrastinate?**

- They don't manage their time well.
- Their goals are unclear.
- The task may lack relevance.
- They feel unable to handle the task.
- They don't fully understand how to do the task
- They are unable to say no to others.
- They feel overwhelmed.
- They thrive on risk.
- They are perfectionists.
- They fear failure.
- They fear success (because it may raise others’ expectations of them).
- They don't fully understand how to do the task
- They fear success (because it may raise others’ expectations of them).

Procrastination has some obvious consequences. First, it increases stress. The task still looms in the background. Procrastination can also diminish your confidence. You may procrastinate because you’re unsure how to do a task. But this makes you feel less sure of your ability. Third, procrastinating makes it harder to handle difficult tasks. And let's face it: you’ll have difficult academic tasks throughout college, on the job, and in life. Procrastination is also deceptive; in essence you’re lying to yourself. Finally, procrastination can hurt your grades. According to Wesley (1994), procrastination and time management have a stronger effect on college grades than high school grades and SAT scores combined.

Sometimes we delay doing a task because we need time to think about it. Like coffee, ideas may need time to brew. But this differs from habitual procrastination, when we simply avoid doing tasks.

These strategies can help you control procrastination:

1. **Make honest decisions about your work, and accept the consequences.** If you do not intend to spend much time on a task, admit that to yourself rather than feeling guilty that you’re not spending more time. Weigh the consequence of only spending minimal time on the task. Then decide if you can live with those consequences.

2. **Develop an accurate understanding of what you need to do to accomplish the task.** Once you know just what you will need to do, you can more realistically plan the time needed to do it.

3. **Plan!** Procrastinators usually think, "I'll do it when I feel like it" or "I'll do it when inspiration strikes." Some procrastinators avoid even thinking about the task at all. However, you’re more likely to complete a task if you plan a specific time to do it. Careful planning is the most effective way to control procrastination.

4. **Break your task into smaller, more manageable tasks.** As soon as you receive a large assignment, reserve at least 10 or 15 minutes each day to work on it. This is especially important with difficult or unpleasant tasks. Breaking a large task into subtasks makes it feel less overwhelming. This also gives you more beginnings and endings. With each “ending,” you feel a sense of accomplishment, which motivates you to move on to the next subtask.

5. **Distribute the subtasks reasonably within the time frame.** Spread the subtasks over time so you don't get tired. Be sure to allow ample time to complete each subtask.

6. **Expect difficulties.** Don’t expect to change overnight. Notice that the title of this handout is “Controlling Procrastination,” not “Eliminating Procrastination.” Aim to procrastinate less and less.
7. **Tune out negative thoughts.** Saying “I’m a procrastinator” can be an excuse for not improving. Focus on the positive. Tell yourself that you can improve and that you can – and will – begin tasks earlier.

8. **Try the 10-minute challenge.** Work on the task for 10 minutes. If you understand what you need to do and can tolerate doing it, give it another 10 minutes, and then another 10, until you finish or until you can’t do any more. If you have to stop, determine what steps you need to take to finish the task. Do you need to email your instructor with a question? Do you need to do more research? Do you need to return to the task when you’re less tired? Then make a plan for the next steps.

9. **Reward yourself.** Everyone enjoys a pat on the back. Because academic work can be demanding, reward yourself. For example, if you need to read a chapter in Economics, get an ice cream cone or call a friend after you’re done. When you turn in a research paper, treat yourself to a movie or a concert. Just be sure that your rewards are proportionate to the task. It’s a great feeling to be done. Savor that feeling.

10. **Monitor your progress with the subtasks.** Be cautious of any tendency to procrastinate, even with subtasks. Watch for the causes of procrastination described above. Consider how each subtask fits into the larger task. Remind yourself that completing each subtask moves you closer to completing the entire task.

11. **Be reasonable in your expectations of yourself.** If you try to be a perfectionist, you might give up. This just makes things worse, because the task may never be completed.

12. **Remember your long-term goals.** Why are you in college? Where do you see yourself five or ten years from now? How will a college education help you get there? In the middle of a semester, it can be easy to put off studying for a difficult statistics exam. However, knowing that passing Statistics will move you closer to your long-term goal can become an incentive to study. Write your long-term goals on an index card and post them where you can see them each day.

13. **Don’t expect to change overnight.** Controlling procrastination needs to occur gradually. Don’t use your inability to change overnight as another excuse to procrastinate.

14. If the problem persists, **consult an expert.** Professionals in the Counseling Center (Seton Hall, Lower Level) can help you discover the causes of your procrastination. Professionals in the Office of Academic Support (Seton Hall, 1st floor) can help you with strategies for controlling procrastination. The Office of Academic Support also has additional handouts on controlling procrastination. Many college and university web sites also contain useful suggestions.

15. **Motivate yourself.** Think of the future rewards and benefits of doing quality work now.

16. **Surround yourself with people who don’t procrastinate.**

17. **Learn to say no to others** who want you to socialize or do things that waste too much time.

References

“Controlling Procrastination.” Pamphlet from the Learning Resource Centre at the University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada.


“Overcoming Procrastination” on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign web site, www.odos.uiuc.edu/Counseling_Center/procras.htm.


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