You woke this morning with the same number of hours, minutes and seconds in the day as everyone else. What you do with that non-renewable resource defines how efficient and effective you’ll be today, and tomorrow, and next week – and helps define what you’ll achieve in a lifetime.

Most of us experience poor time management now and then; for some of us that experience becomes habitual, and we need to unlearn bad habits and adopt new ones. This blog post aims to help anyone, especially graduate students, make better use of their time.

Poor time management may lead to poor punctuality, constant rushing, disorganisation, errors, misunderstanding, poorly defined goals, poor performance, procrastination, lack of energy, dangerous stress levels, indecisiveness, compulsion to do everything oneself, and perfectionism. Can you think of other outcomes of poor time management?

None of those are desirable qualities. If any resonate with your experience, the good news is that you can take action to change the way you plan and organise your life. Developing good practical skills in time management will improve your efficiency (getting lots of tasks done) and effectiveness (getting the right tasks done) – in a day, in a week, in a year. And no matter how expert you and I are in managing your time, I’m convinced we can always improve.

Here are ten tips I recommend for improving time management.

1. Plan ahead

Create a daily to-do list of the large and small tasks you need to do today. With such a list you’ll remember tasks better and find it easier to set priorities. And you’ll experience a sense of satisfaction deleting each one as it is completed. Uncompleted tasks can be assigned to another day’s list. Don’t keep looking at your list and feeling overwhelmed by the demands – focus on the task at hand. A weekly schedule of all your waking hours may also help with planning. Consider working with an online to-do app such as Remember the Milk, Things or ToDos.

2. Prioritise

Know what must be done today. Some tasks are important, others are urgent. Some are necessary, others are not. Complete the most important tasks first. Attending to minor tasks may empower other key actions, so responding to significant emails or posting a package may be more important right now than editing that draft essay. On the other hand, always be free to eliminate the non-essential so you can work on tasks that are both urgent and important.

3. Protect your prime time

Your prime time is those hours when you often do your best and most productive intellectual work. Protect this time for the most important tasks. Do a time audit (using the Toggl app or similar) to log how you actually spend your day, and then make whatever changes are necessary to boost efficiency and effectiveness. Graduate students should consider reserving prime time for critical reading, note-taking and writing.
4. **Set time limits**

Estimate how long a task is likely to take and set a time limit for completion. Don't strive for perfection: get it done and move on to the next task. Where possible, limit multi-tasking as it can lead to lack of focus and procrastination.

5. **Avoid procrastination**

Follow your plan and get today's assigned tasks done. In addition to careful planning, the best way to avoid procrastination is to divide large tasks into manageable smaller tasks. Even if you don't complete the whole task, achieving something is better than achieving nothing. For the most demanding tasks, get an early start and work on them first thing in the morning. If procrastination becomes a habit, identify a causal behaviour, catch yourself doing it, and take remedial action.

6. **Minimise disruptions**

Find a study environment with limited distraction from outside noise (such as heavy vehicles, construction work, lawn mowers), foot traffic, and unwanted music. Set good boundaries and block out personal distractions such as internet surfing and social media using an app such as [Freedom](https://www.freedom.to) or [SelfControl](https://www.selfcontrolapp.com). During waiting times, such as in a shopping queue or a doctor's waiting room, work on minor tasks like sorting and answering emails online or in a phone app.

7. **Organise your work space**

Create information management systems to serve you: file systems (paper and computer), citation software, email. Unsubscribe from email lists whose content you no longer want to receive. Turn off social media notifications. Once a week (such as Sunday night), spend an hour previewing the week ahead, assigning every known task to one of four categories: Do it, Defer it, Delegate it, or Drop it.

8. **Learn to say ‘no’**

You don't have to do everything people ask or invite you to do. When faced with requests that demand your time, remain sensitive to the needs but ask yourself: “What's in it for me?” Delegate where possible. Tame the telephone (you don't have to answer every call). You don't have to attend every meeting either. Where possible, politely decline requests by others to do things for/with them – they may be trying to delegate tasks to you!

9. **Turn key tasks into habits**

When you discover a new way to improve your time management, keep at it until the practice becomes a habit. Establish a productive routine, altering it only when necessary. Study and write at regular times in the week. Developing good habits around time management is the best overall way to maximise your efficiency and effectiveness, and the effects are cumulative.

10. **Reward yourself**

Reward your hard work and discipline. Practice delayed gratification. Schedule short breaks (or healthy snacks) between tasks, or during longer tasks. For example, work 50 minutes on a task, and take a ten-minute break, preferably outside or in another room. Celebrate your wins! Schedule quality family time, entertainment and leisure time, internet and social media time. Give yourself sufficient time to unwind and relax before sleep, and ensure that you get enough sleep every night.

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