

Time Management Strategies

Do you ever feel that time is passing faster and faster each day and the only thing you are trying to do is to keep up with it? If so, you are not alone. We all struggle with a mountain of things that we would like to do, perhaps especially so in the American culture where a lot of pressure is placed on timelines and due dates. Whether the twenty-four hours we have each day is enough or not depends to a great extent on how we manage our time. There are many ways, however, to improve your time management skills and to feel better about how you're spending your time.

Everybody has a different sense of how to best spend their time. For one person a slow- paced day is just about right, while someone else may prefer an action-packed day. Although it is hard to agree on one definition of successful time management, poor time management has well defined symptoms such as:

- Being in constant rush
- Running out of time to complete tasks
- Fatigue
- Consistently missing deadlines
- Insufficient time for rest, sleep, eating, or personal relationships
- Sense of being overwhelmed by demands and details
(*Self-Help Materials: Time Management*, n.d.).

In the rush of our lives it can become easy to get used to being busy or tired. We often justify it by saying, "That's life," without looking at what extent we make it this way. If you find that any of the above symptoms apply to you, take a second look at how you manage your time.

Assess how you manage your time:

The Time Assessment Chart, a simple tool that can be downloaded from our website at www.roosevelt.edu/counseling allows you to record your daily activities for one week and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of your time management skills. Seem time consuming? Not really! Although it will take one week of some effort, it is well worth it to make the remaining weeks less hectic and more productive and fun. Here are some tips on how to utilize the chart:

- Before you start, make sure that you choose one of the more typical weeks of your life. Assessing the use of your time during finals or holidays when your schedule does not represent what you typically do during a week will not give you reliable information for improving your time management skills.
- Log your activities on an ongoing basis. Do not wait until the end of the day to write down what you did; most likely, you will forget some of it by the evening. It is a good idea to have the Time Assessment Chart with you all the time and log each activity you have completed (Mackenzie & Waldo, 1981).
- Record your activities faithfully. For example, if you planned to study from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. but half of that time you spent talking with your roommate, write down what you really did. It does not matter that it may not look as "good" as you would like it to; the chart is only for you and nobody else has to see it.

- Record details. For example, include 5-10 minute phone conversations and what they were about, even if they happened while you were working on a bigger task. It will allow you to identify distractions as well as determine the importance of those activities (Mackenzie & Waldo, 1981, p. 22).
- At the end of each day, go back to the chart. In the column "Time Used," write how much time you spent on each activity during the day and rank its priority on a scale from 1 to 4; write the ranking in the "Priority" column. Use the following guidelines to rank the priority:

Number one priorities are important and urgent at the moment and, if left undone, have serious consequences. For instance, if you decided that writing a 20 page paper due tomorrow can wait, the goal of getting an A in the course is seriously jeopardized.

Number two priorities are things that are less urgent but still important. Those are the tasks that you might postpone to the next day if you run out of time, but you still will be able to complete them by their due dates.

Number three priorities are your daily routine activities such as taking a shower, dropping the kids off at school, or walking your dog.

Number four priorities are not necessary to achieve your goals, and you can easily do them some other time.

A sample Time Assessment Chart might look like this:

| Time | Activity | Time Spent | Priority | Problem | Solution |
|-------------------------|--|------------|----------|--|---|
| 7.30a.m.- 8.15a.m. | Took a shower, got dressed | 45 min | 3 | Too long in the bathroom; do not track time while in the shower | Put an alarm clock in the bathroom |
| 8.15a.m.- 8.45a.m. | Ate breakfast | 30 min | 3 | No problem | - |
| 8.45a.m.-9a.m. | Checked e-mail | 15 min | 2 | No problem | - |
| 9a.m.-9.20a.m. | Writing a paper | 15 min | 1 | Spent too much time talking with people instead of writing the paper | Turn the phone off and close the door when studying |
| 9.20a.m.- 9.50a.m. | Talked on the phone with Dave about his new car | 30 min | 4 | | |
| 9.50a.m.- 10.10a.m. | Writing the paper | 20 min | 1 | | |
| 10.10a.m.- 10.35a.m. | Talked with Jane who dropped by to borrow the biology textbook | 25 min | 4 | | |

Analyze the Time Assessment Chart

At the end of the week, sit down and analyze how you used your time. The following questions will help you evaluate your log:

- How much time did you spend on tasks of different priority ranks? Did the time you spent on different activities reflect your priorities?

- What was the most common interruption (e.g. phone, visitors, meetings, self, family)? How important were the interruptions? How often and for how long were you interrupted? How many interrupted tasks did you leave unfinished?
- How much time did you spend responding to problems that could be predicted and prevented?
- How often and for how long did you interact with others? How important were your interactions with others for completing your goals? (Mackenzie & Waldo, 1981, pp. 18-19).

While evaluating the Time Assessment Chart, you will find that some things went well: you achieved your goal or spent a certain amount of time productively. Mark those as "No Problem" and congratulate yourself! You did a good job! For other activities where you could spend time more efficiently, try to identify factors lowering your effectiveness and plan what changes you can make. For example, if you noticed that you spent most of your study time answering the phone, think about turning the phone off during that time. If you find that you study whenever you have a quiet 15 minutes, the solution may be to schedule a longer period of time specifically for studying. Try to think about the simplest solutions you could implement; the easier they are, the more likely you will actually use them. Write down the problems and the solutions in the designated columns of your Time Assessment Chart.

Create your Schedule

Now that you know what your week generally looks like and have some information and solutions identified, it is time to develop a schedule. Use whatever calendar is convenient for you: a student workbook, an electronic planner, or anything else that you think will do. There are three types of plans to prepare: long-term, intermediate and short-term:

To create the **long-term schedule** for the semester, put fixed commitments in your calendar. It should include your work hours, classes, and other activities that always happen at the same time of day, week or month. It should also include important school dates such as project deadlines and dates of exams.

The **intermediate schedule** consists of tasks for the upcoming week, such as "paper on Thursday" or "Johnny's football game." Rank the importance and urgency of each task on a scale from 1 to 4 in the same way you did when assessing your time. Notice that once you rank your tasks, the hierarchy is not permanent. Certain things can change their priority level; something that one week was a number four priority may become urgent and important the next week. After ranking your tasks it is time to schedule them. If you know the particular time when a given event will take place, enter it into your planner.

If not, look at your calendar and see what would be the best time for you to do each thing according to its priority and your available time and write it in your planner.

The last type of schedule is the **short-term schedule**, which specifies your plan or "to do" list for the next day. Prepare it every evening before you go to bed and review it each morning to have an overview of what is to be accomplished during the day. Write down all the details, such as "read chapter 4," "breakfast," or "meeting with Sue." Prioritize the activities as you did with your weekly tasks and then plug them into your planner with a specific time range for each one.

Stick to it!

Well, you are almost there! The only thing left to do is to make sure that you stick to your plan. Do not get discouraged if it feels different or awkward to live a day according to a schedule; it may initially be a challenge just because you are not used to using this tool. Developing new skills-- and time management is definitely a skill-- takes some time and practice, but once they become a habit, you will need only 5 to 10 minutes a day to develop your schedule without special effort. The tools described above are not rigid; adjust them to your needs. And any time you think, "I don't have time for this scheduling stuff!" compare the time you spend doing it to the time it saves you. Whether you use the extra time for pleasure or work, investment in time management is highly profitable. Good luck!

Average Amount of Time Spent Doing Things In A Lifetime:

2.5 years driving a car
6 months waiting at red lights
5 years waiting in line
6 years eating
2 years returning phone calls
1 year looking for misplaced objects
23 years in bed
7 years in the bathroom
8 months opening junk mail

These activities add up to about 50 years! (Fisher,2004)

References:

- Fisher, K. (2004). *Time management*. Retrieved July 3, 2006, from http://www.sanjoseca.gov/prns/NDC/index_asp_MMtmp27192fc4/time_mgmnt.pdf
- Mackenzie, R. A., & Waldo, K. C. (1981). *About time! A woman's guide to time management*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Self-help materials: Time management*. (n.d.) Retrieved July 3, 2006, from Potomac State College of West Virginia University, Academic Success Center Web site: <http://www.potomacstatecollege.edu/academics/timemanagement.html>

Amount of Time Spent

| Time Spent Priority | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday | Total | Percentage of Time Spent |
|------------------------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|-------|--------------------------|
| 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | | | | | | |
| 4 | | | | | | | | | |

Percentage of Time Spent=Total Hours/168