FAST FACTS

Time Management

Where is your time going? Are you using your time as efficiently as you could be? Managing time effectively requires judicious planning, prioritizing and some degree of self-discipline. It's not an innate ability; it's a skill that you can learn.

"Joe Carnegie's" Academic Schedule Wednesday, February 5

6:30-6:35 a.m. Alarm rings. Awaken; drink coffee.
6:35-7:30 a.m. Work to complete physics problem set, due at 8 a.m.
7:30-7:45 a.m. Cram feverishly to complete physics problem set, due at 8 a.m.
7:45-7:55 a.m. Shower and dress.
7:55-8 a.m. Run to physics class. Eat breakfast en route: one HoHo.
9:20-9:30 a.m. Walk back to dorm in dazed stupor. Drink coffee.
9:30 a.m. Begin work on paper, due for English class at 3 p.m.
10 a.m. Awaken from unscheduled nap.
10:05 a.m. Arrive at chemistry lecture, already in progress.
11:20-11:30 a.m. Walk back to dorm in dazed stupor. Drink coffee.
11:30 a.m.-noon Check e-mail. Respond to important messages.
Noon-2 p.m. Check relevant bboards. Respond to important posts in netnews.talk.chia-pet. Drink coffee.
2-2:45 p.m. Write paper, due for English class at 3 p.m.
2:45-2:50 p.m. Type paper into computer. Queue document to print.
3:07 p.m. Document prints.
3:15 p.m. Arrive at English class, already in progress.
4:30 p.m. Dinner with friends, Original Hot Dog stand. Cheeseburger with fries, large Coke.
5 p.m. Aerobics.
6:30 p.m. Study session, Hunt Library.
8:30 p.m. Jazz Band practice. Tenor saxophone, John Coltrane.
11 p.m.-12:30 a.m. Free time. Television: "Godzilla vs. Mothra."
3:37 a.m. Awaken in front of blank TV. Attempt removal of contact lenses, welded onto eyes. Brush teeth. Stumble off to bed.
6:30 a.m. Alarm rings. Cycle repeats *ad nauseam.*

Managing Your Time

Where is your time going? Are you using your time as efficiently as you could be? Managing time effectively requires judicious planning, prioritizing and some degree of self-discipline. It's not an innate ability; it's a skill that you can learn.

We call the various distractions, mental rationalizations and unhappy accidents that somehow conspire to suck up time "time wasters."

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Self-generated time wasters are those that come about as a result of your thoughts, feelings and actions, such as being disorganized, being unable to say “no” to tempting distractions, succumbing to the urge to procrastinate or feeling burned-out or apathetic. *Environmental* time wasters are those imposed upon you by the environment, such as unexpected visitors, interruptive phone calls, “no show” appointments or unproductive meetings .

The rewards of efficient time management are great: less stress, less anxiety and better grades. So what can you do to get a handle on your time?

Steps for Taking Action

Plan

Obtaining mastery over your time begins with careful planning. Think of your planning as two types: long- and short-term. Long-term planning takes into account goals spanning from one to five years in the future, including such major events as moving into a new apartment, applying to grad school, purchasing a car and so on. Short-term plans are much more immediate and cover events that will take place in the months, weeks or days ahead. Preparing for a physics exam, purchasing a new computer and compiling a research bibliography might all be considered goals to be met through short-term planning.

The first thing to do is to start and maintain a “to do” list. You’ll actually need two lists: a daily list itemizing all the tasks needed to attain the goals of your short-term plans, and a master list specifying what needs to be done for your long-term ones. Keep these lists handy; whenever you think of something else you have to do, jot it down before you forget. If you’re ever confused about what chore to tackle next, refer back to your list. With each task that you complete, give yourself the satisfaction of scratching it off the list.

Prioritize

Determine which tasks on your lists are most pressing and—most important—and work on those first. Use your lists to compare and contrast the time requirements of one task against another. Try to differentiate between the things that you want to do and those that you need to do. Distinguish between what you need to do for yourself and what needs to be done for other people. Which is more important?

Schedule

Use a calendar to keep track of your activities. When scheduling time, figure in fixed blocks of time first, such as the time you spend in class or doing homework. Remember to include time for eating, sleeping, running errands, paying bills, washing clothes and other miscellaneous but necessary activities. Set realistic goals–you might find yourself disillusioned if you can’t keep up with a too-ambitious schedule.

It’s a good idea to develop weekly as opposed to monthly or semesterly study schedules; weekly schedules are more flexible. Focus on what you actually will accomplish as opposed to what you think you should be accomplishing. Expect the unexpected. Your schedule should include enough time for you to recover should some unforeseen problem arise.

Divide and Conquer

A task will often seem overwhelming because it demands a great commitment of time and energy. If this is the case, dividing the task into smaller parts may help. You can calculate how much time will be needed for the entire task by estimating the time needed for each part. Finding time to work on these subtasks will be easier as well, since you can fit small chunks of time into your schedule more readily than larger ones. Make your goals **SMART**: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**eachable and **T**imely. Break down your tasks into doable activities and identify obstacles in achieving each of them.

Let’s say your general goal is to earn an “A” in Chemistry. Break that goal into a series of simpler, well-defined tasks: studying a chapter every other day, working through homework sets every Tuesday and Thursday, reviewing lecture notes at the end of the week, and so on. With each smaller task you complete, accentuate the positive by congratulating yourself on a job well done.

Keep a time log

Buy yourself a notebook in which to keep track of how your time is spent. Set up a schedule plotting the time in half-hour blocks, 24 hours a day. For each block, set up columns that permit you to record information about the way your time is spent. Keep your log updated in this manner for at least a week.

For example, you might divide the page into columns titled “Activity,”

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"Value," "Pressing," "Scheduled" and "Interruptions." Under the "Activity" column, record what you did during each half-hour, whether it was sleeping, eating, studying, talking on the phone or some other activity. In the "Value" column, enter whether the activity was of high or low value—whether it really contributed toward helping you complete your work, or whether it was simply a time waster. Place a check in the "Pressing" column if you were feeling pressure to get the job done. Place a check in the "Scheduled" column if the activity was indeed what you had scheduled for that time. Indicate in the "Interruptions" column if the event was an interruption from what you had originally planned; record what kind of interruption it was.

Analyze the time log
Using the data recorded in your time log, determine how your time is being ill-used. What percentage of your activities were of high or low value? Were you interrupted often? If so, how can you best avoid the types of interruptions you experienced? Is there a major discrepancy between the goals you set and what you actually achieved? Which activities could be simplified or eliminated altogether?

Give yourself a pep talk
Whenever you have work to do that you don't really want to begin, try to think up ways to motivate yourself. Tell yourself that you'll see a movie or buy that new CD after you finish your work.

Contrive situations that will force you to concentrate
For example, you might make a commitment to meet someone for a study session. Figure out what time of the day you work at peak form and complete your most demanding work during that time. If you're most alert in the morning, for instance, it may be unwise to attempt late-night study sessions. Try to be honest with yourself—recognize when you're wasting time and gently guide yourself back on course.

Use the Five-Minute Plan
If you are having a difficult time motivating yourself to begin a task, give this strategy a try: figure out how much of the job you can accomplish in five minutes' worth of work, then complete that amount of work and that work only. If you are writing a research paper, for example, five minutes may give you only enough time to collect your notes and perhaps sketch a brief outline. After the time is up, take a short break in which you do something entirely different, then plan what you will accomplish in your next five-minute session. The key is to force yourself to stop after five minutes; if you don't, the next time you try this technique you'll know subconsciously that you intend to work longer and the job will seem no less daunting. Work only for five minutes, but make those five minutes count.

If this strategy works for you, after a while you may want to lengthen your work session to ten or fifteen minutes at a time. Always keep it short enough so that the task before you doesn't seem overwhelming. Keep the intervals between work sessions reasonably brief as well. It does you no good to work for five minutes at a time—no matter how effectively—if you only work once or twice a day.

Beware of trivial time wasters
Sometimes when we want to put off an unsavory task we'll resort to tackling a chore that seems important but isn't, relatively speaking. Cleaning up your room or doing your laundry may give you the feeling that you've accomplished something, but they don't really do much in helping you complete a paper that's due the next day. Again, it's a matter of prioritizing the tasks that need to be done.

Try to identify and eliminate unnecessary activities. If you find yourself watching old reruns or skimming magazines when you should be studying, gently persuade yourself to get back on track.

Exploit idle time
You'd be surprised how much extra work you can fit into a day if you merely make use of the time you normally idle away. There are any number of strategies you can use to take advantage of this extra time. Place your notes on 3 x 5 cards, for example, so that you can quiz yourself as you walk to class. Keep a textbook handy so that you can read as you wait for the bus. Record study notes on tape and listen to them on your portable stereo as you do your shopping.

Eliminate or reduce distractions
If your roommate blasts her stereo every night at seven, for example, it might be a good idea to be in the library studying by that time.

Schedule enough time to complete each task
If you take shortcuts now, you may regret it later if you have to cram to finish some project.

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Expect setbacks

You will always experience setbacks whenever you try to change a bad habit. Don't let them get the best of you. If you have a bad day, your efforts haven't all been in vain. Simply start the next day with a firm resolution to do better.