

FIRST-YEAR FAST FACTS

Week 2 A Lot to Do

Optimizing Your Time

• Managing Coursework & Readings

“Learning to prioritize is a big key to succeeding as a first-year college student. Too much time studying and you burn out; not enough and the Dean’s List is looking like a distant memory. In the first few weeks of class, determine which courses will take the most time and effort and learn to spend more time focusing on those. Don’t spend hours on calculus if that course is an easy A, but spend some extra time each night on French if that is a course you’ll struggle in. Learning to prioritize time will help you to master not only your courses, but also maintain some semblance of a life away from academics.”

–Josh, Chemical Engineering

“Treat your academic life a job. Expect to spend a minimum of 40 hours a week working –preparing for and attending classes, completing assignments, etc.”

–Sanjay, Design

“Expect to spend two hours of study time to every one hour of class time; more for tougher courses.”

–Jessie, History

Optimizing Your Time

Prioritize projects, budget time.

Even with the best intentions, you’re not going to be able to devote equal time and energy to all of your courses. The good news is that you probably don’t have to. Some courses may be easy for you just because you bring some background knowledge to them, and you won’t have to devote so much time to those. Other courses just naturally take more time to prepare for and do the work for—there may be labs or papers or both. Whatever the case, you should work out a system where you can wisely use your time where it’s needed. This may change week by week, but you should plan your schedule in advance so that you know what projects or courses take priority, instead of being overwhelmed by it all.

Below is some advice on how to prioritize your work and budget your time:

- Find tools to help you be successful in time management, such as a planner, calendar or a to-do list. Choose whatever method that works best for you, but stick with it so that you don’t have multiple lists or calendars going.
- At the beginning of the semester, write down all of the due dates from your syllabi in your planner. Update it when those dates change.
- Look ahead to the end of the semester and build a schedule with plenty of time to complete every project; expect that work will take longer than you think it will.
- Set short-term (such as by day or by week) and long-term (such as by month or by semester) goals to help you keep your eye on the big picture and therefore manage your time more effectively.
- Although you should keep a somewhat long-range perspective, try to take one day at a time when you have a lot to do. Try not to become overwhelmed. Look at your situation and determine what little things you can do today to work toward your goals.
- Start your homework the day it’s handed out so you can ask questions about it if you need to.
- Study early, don’t wait until the weekend to get started on your work.
- Figure out if you are morning or a night person, and adjust your study schedule to take advantage of your most alert hours.
- Be aware that poor time-management habits can snowball into even more work to do. For instance, pulling all-nighters to finish work on time can lead to missing early classes, which can



A Lot to Do

“When I was a freshman and had too much work to do, I just took a mental health day. Now even if I feel I need one, I have a mental health day to take –maybe a mental health hour. I absolutely don’t want to miss class, or the opportunity to learn from the discussion we have that day.”

–Eva, Business Administration

“Procrastination does not work at CMU.”

–Jon, Engineering and Public Policy

“Striking a balance between social activities and academics is perhaps the most essential advice. Amidst all the opportunities to procrastinate or slack off, I learned the best way to stay on track and be less stressed was through good notes, collaborating with friends, and working in advance. Staying in on a Saturday night was not at all uncommon; in fact, I’ve found others have similar priorities and positive, studious habits.”

–Anne, SHA Program

“When I began college, time always seemed to slop through my fingers, since there was always someone who wanted to socialize. I decided that I could be more efficient if I planned out my days specifically as possible. I bought a planner with 15-minute time slots and began a rigid schedule. For the most part, I have been able to be more efficient and schedule social events within the time of each day. Now I feel a sense of accomplishment and avoid procrastination.”

–Emil, Music

lead to falling behind, which can lead to more all-nighters, and so on.

- *Beware of overly large blocks of time, and take advantage of small ones.* Don’t fill just one small task into a large block of time. Rather, maximize that time to accomplish several small tasks. And try to use small blocks of time that are usually “dead” time to do tasks like prepare for a class, review notes or revamp your calendar schedule.
- *Note in your planner where you expect to spend your time and how you actually spend it.*
- *When doing homework, silence your phone.*

Don’t put it off.

We all procrastinate—though some of us are “better” at it than others. You may find yourself avoiding tasks that you find tedious, overwhelming, irrelevant or boring. And you may procrastinate for reasons that stem from behavior you’ve developed throughout your life—for instance, maybe you’re afraid of failure, or success. But whatever the reason, whatever the cause, procrastination will not get your work done, and will cause much more stress in the long-run.

Fortunately, there are some proven techniques that can help you combat procrastination:

- *Set realistic goals* by prioritizing and thoroughly considering exactly what you need to do. Re-prioritize and redefine your goals as needed. (You might want to consult your academic advisor or our office to help you in prioritizing).
- *Divide and conquer* by breaking long-term goals into smaller, achievable ones. It will make you

feel like you’re making progress as you cross these smaller achievements off your to-do list.

- *Try the “just five minutes” trick.* If you’re having trouble getting motivated to do a task you’ve been avoiding, tell yourself you’ll spend “just five minutes” on it. Really try to get something done in those five minutes, but stop when the time is up; otherwise, the next time you use this trick on yourself you will subconsciously know that you intend to work longer. If this five-minute time frame works for you, try increasing it to ten or fifteen minutes the next time you’re avoiding a task, but keep it short enough so that the task before you doesn’t seem overwhelming. Note: Only use this trick if you are really unmotivated since working for only five, ten, or fifteen minutes at a time with long breaks in between won’t allow you to get much accomplished.
- *Visualize success* by imagining that the task is done and done well. Think about how good you’ll feel and the reward you can give yourself.
- *Know yourself and the tasks you avoid.* By understanding what it is you avoid and why you avoid it, you can better combat those leanings. For instance, you may try to rationalize that doing laundry is more important than starting to write a paper. Understand that by prioritizing laundry over school work, you are avoiding getting your real work done.
- *Try different procrastination-combating techniques.* But don’t try several at a time, or it will just seem like more to do. And remember that some of the techniques will work for you and some won’t.



A Lot to Do

FACULTY FEEDBACK

“It’s always wise to remember that although college is a big deal, it’s not the biggest deal. When you’re stressed out, take a short walk to the Carnegie Museum of Natural History or Art or the Carnegie Library. It’s an excellent way to take a break from school and visit your nearby community. Recharge yourself with the things you enjoy... It’s important and healthy for you to maintain perspective and balance.”

—Professor, Philosophy

“Doing homework means that you’re keeping up with the lectures, practicing problem solving, applying the theory taught in lecture—all of which help you understand the material. There is the added benefit that if you’ve practiced solving problems throughout the course, you’ll be able to concentrate on studying the tougher material at test time.”

—Professor, Physics

WISDOM FROM FELLOW STUDENTS...

“There’s a real easy way to get your problem sets done and correct: start early! This gives you time to think the problem over, ask questions in class and read over the chapter.”

—Aaron, Chemistry

“In high school, you just read the book and understood how to get from one point in the text to another. At Carnegie Mellon, reading the material is not enough—you have to be familiar with the material, and you have to work with the material.”

—Tom, Architecture

- *Go slowly in fighting procrastination* by aiming for permanent, long-term improvement. It took a long time for you to develop procrastinating habits; it will take a while to change them.
- *Expect setbacks.* You maybe have a bad day, but start anew the next day with a firm resolution to do better.

Balance work and play.

Some students arrive on campus ready to study. Some arrive ready to play. Whatever your intentions, you will find that you’re going to need a mix of both. But the right balance between working and playing is up to you. Pay attention to how you are balancing your time. Are you happy with how much you study? With how much you relax? As long as you are satisfied with your accomplishments—both in class and in your personal life—you must be going about it the right way.

Don’t let it stress you out.

Classes, homework, readings, studying, labs, rehearsals, papers, roommate troubles. Too much work, not enough time. All these things seem to build up during the semester and you may well find yourself feeling overwhelmed and stressed out. It may not have happened yet, and it may not happen at all to you, but if it does, you might find these tips useful in fighting off stress:

- *Get control.* The more you’re in control of a situation, the less likely you are to be stressed out about it. Gain control of how much you’re learning by asking your instructor for feedback on your performance. Gain control of your time by making thoughtful decisions about what courses to take or activities to become involved in. Gain control

of friendship or roommate problems by talking through difficult issues with them.

- *Be calm.* Go for a walk or a run, listen to soothing music, watch a movie or use more formal methods of relaxation such as meditation.
- *Think positively.* A positive attitude can have a dramatic effect on how you approach seemingly overwhelmed situations.
- *Talk things over with classmates and friends.* You may be surprised and relieved to find that others are feeling similar pressures.
- *Eat well, sleep well and get some exercise.* You’ll be at your best when you follow a balanced diet, get enough sleep (at least six hours) and get some regular exercise.
- *Enjoy life.* Remember that the reason you’re working so hard on school work is to have a better life. So why not enjoy some of it now? Even though you must set limits on play time in favor of academics, you should still strive for a balance between work and relaxation, and enjoy time with your friends and family.

Managing Coursework and Readings

College presents a challenge in many ways, but mainly because the work is very different than it was in high school—and there is so much more of it! If you know what to expect, and use some of these tips to help you through it all, you will be up to the challenge and can tackle it easily.



A Lot to Do

“I had to learn selective reading. I can’t read everything, so I need to set priorities, especially in psychology courses where there is so much to read. Sometimes we each read one of the assigned chapters and then make summaries for everybody in the group.”

–Ming, Psychology

FACULTY FEEDBACK

“Reading is more than just getting through the text. You have to make sure you really know it. After all, you can’t just read a book about a sport one day and expect to play it well the next day.”

–Professor, English

MORE WISDOM FROM FELLOW STUDENTS...

“When you get here, don’t be intimidated; everybody’s in the same boat. Also, it’s important to go out and get to know your surroundings, in case you feel the need to get away. There’s so much to do here.”

–Nathan, Civil & Environmental Engineering

“Just make connections. Meet people of all ages –teachers, advisors, whoever you can.”

–Megan, Business Administration

“Have a mission statement in mind. Constantly reevaluate what you want to do in life. Think about how you’re going to get what you want.”

–Hari, Computer Science

“College is, without a doubt, the best chance for you to redefine who you are. A lot of the people who come here only see their books and don’t do anything else. I think they need to know that this can be a time for change.”

–Drew, Drama

Do the work.

People don’t learn to play the piano by cramming the night before a recital. In any subject area, experts become expert because they practice a *lot*. In college, the only way you get better at solving problems, writing paper or designing buildings is to do these things frequently, get feedback and do them again.

The ideal strategy for doing homework is to start it early and see what parts of the homework are unclear, then use faculty or TA office hours or lecture or recitation time to ask a few good questions. Waiting until the night before a homework is due makes it more difficult to do well on the homework, and much more difficult to learn the fundamental concepts the homework was meant to reinforce. The same strategy works on writing papers or doing big projects—starting early and getting feedback from the professor TA can keep you on the right track.

Many students keep their homeworks even after they’ve been graded so that they can rework the problems they got wrong to prepare for a quiz or test.

Read the book.

In many majors, you will have plenty of reading—in some more than others. Information you get from your readings is just as important as the information you get from lectures, labs and studio and the knowledge you gain from homework—and is often just as likely to be tested.

You should approach readings the same way you approach doing homework and other projects; plan ahead so you won’t get behind.

You may find that you need different reading strategies for different courses. You might skip headings and read introductions, highlight key terms and ideas by using different

colors of pens, use Post-It notes or write in the margins.

Textbooks will often introduce a new chapter by relating it to the previous one. This connection can help you stay on track, especially when the reading material gets difficult.

In reading—as in notetaking—there are several recommended methods to master the work. It’s a good idea to try different methods in order to find the best one for you. But once you do find a method that works, you should stick with it. We offer individual instruction in effective reading as well as a “Fast Fact” handout on “Textbook Reading Strategies,” available on our website (see the URL at the end of this page).

“One of my favorite quotes is ‘Life is a journey, not a destination.’ Students who take this message to heart realize that they need to be not so focused on their goal that they lose sight of the reasons why they are pursuing it and miss opportunities to refine and revise along the way. This is not to say one shouldn’t have goals, but rather implies the value of constantly reevaluating and redefining them. I would like to see students less focused on the grade they will earn or the number of words that could appear on the diploma and more focused on learning and growing as a person and a scholar”

–Professor, Biological Sciences

Carnegie Mellon University
Student Academic Success

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