

Overcoming procrastination



One of the worst problems with managing study time is the time you waste when you can't get started - or when you've started but you get stuck. This might happen when you're beginning your research for an assignment, in the middle of doing the research, starting the writing-up or halfway through it.

Sometimes you get 'blocked' although you're trying to work. Alternatively, you might keep putting off a study task, finding other things to do that you convince yourself are more important, or more interesting.

Getting blocked or procrastinating is a concern for all students at some time, and everyone reacts differently. Some people keep trying to do the study task and find it impossible to focus; others do anything except what they need to do; some just find themselves drifting off into a daydream.

The first step in overcoming procrastination is to identify what is stopping you from studying, and then to think about how to get round that. This guide discusses some examples that often come up, and strategies that have proved effective for other students in dealing with them.

If procrastination is a really serious problem for you and is having a significant effect on your ability to complete your course, you need to talk to someone who is experienced in discussing these issues with students (a study support adviser or university counsellor, for instance). There may be underlying issues which are preventing you from studying; an expert will be able to help you identify and deal with these.

"I just feel overwhelmed"

Whether you have multiple assignments due at once, are working on a large-scale project like a dissertation, or have a pile of texts to read that you cannot see over the top of it, being an independent learner at university can often make you feel overwhelmed by the tasks you have to achieve.

The key is to cut the mountain down in size, by breaking down your work into the individual tasks you need to do to achieve it – then do them one at a time.

This replaces the unreachable target with lots of small achievable ones. So as you tick each individual task off your list, you can see yourself making progress to your final goal.

Make sure you give yourself regular breaks too. It may seem counter-intuitive to stop working when there seems to be so much to do, but it will give your brain a chance to process new information, so avoiding that feeling when everything is turning over and over in your head and stopping you from thinking straight. It will also help you to stop seeing study as a punishment you have been sentenced to.

"I get bored when things go on too long"

If you've been focusing on one thing for a long time, it's not surprising that you might be bored with it. Revive your interest by 'selling' your topic to a friend. Explain what you've been doing, and what the purpose was. Try to make them wish they'd chosen your project.

Sometimes it's hard to get an overview of how much you've achieved, and when it's going to end. Rather than seeing a dauntingly long piece of work stretching off into the distance, break it down into steps and set intermediate deadlines. That way you can actually see what you're achieving, and how much closer you are to finishing.

"I don't know where to start"

If you don't have a planned structure for your assignment or project, now's a good time to make one. Once you have a structure, you'll be able to get a clear idea of the things you need to do. Don't worry about it being perfect - you can change it if it doesn't work.

Ask yourself, "what's the one overarching message I need to get across?" Then build up your structure by working out what you need to do to communicate that message.

If you have a structure but are still stuck, try listing all the tasks you need to do to accomplish your overall task. Pick just one and do that (write a paragraph, read a chapter, make a project schedule etc). It's always easier to keep going once you've got started.

A good way to 'release' your thinking when you're stuck is to explain your argument to a friend. Or write out what you need to include as questions. If you were writing an introduction, for instance, you'd need to answer these questions:

- * what is the main issue here?
- * why is it interesting to think about this?
- * how am I going to structure my answer?

Answer each question, then read through and join them up to make an introductory paragraph.

"There's always one more book I need to read"

If you only leave university knowing one thing, it'll be that you can't read everything on your topic. In fact, you are rarely expected to read everything on your reading list (even if you could get hold of it).

Ask yourself if you are over-reading because you lack confidence in your own ideas. the danger is that you will start to rely on other people's ideas rather than using them to support your own.

If this is your problem, get into the habit of writing early drafts, then revising them. Stop reading when you know enough to start writing. Write a draft, then look to see where there are gaps and do targeted reading to fill them. You may be pleasantly surprised by how much you already know without needing to do more reading.

If you read too much, you will end up with so many ideas going round your head that you can't make sense of them. It's always better to make an active selection of a few things to read in depth. And don't worry about whether you've chosen the 'right' things to read - it's what you make of your reading that's important.

"I can't concentrate"

With everything we do in life, it helps to have goals, so we know there's a point to what we're doing - and an end! It's the same with study practices like reading and writing. Set yourself lots of small goals so you have achievable targets to aim for and less chance of losing your focus. For instance, think about what you want to get out of your reading; write down some questions; then actively look for the answers.

It can help with concentration to change modes of study so you don't get bored - switch from reading to writing down a summary of what you've just learnt, for instance - or from writing to reading over what you've just written.

Sometimes the reason we lose concentration is because we don't understand what we're reading, so we have no mental framework to attach the new information to. Make sure you understand the basics of a topic to build a solid foundation for your subsequent knowledge. If there's something you don't understand, take a step back and find out about that before going on.

"Everything I write is rubbish, so I throw it away and start again"

Instead of throwing out what you've written, do what academics do when they're writing - use it as a draft and revise it.

Don't aim for perfection - aim to work towards perfection. Take positive steps by responding specifically to comments that tutors may have made on your work in the past. For instance, some commonly found comments are:

"you need to develop your critical analysis"

"better structuring would have made a stronger argument"

"some of your content is not relevant to the question"

Find out who can help you develop your study practices to avoid seeing these comments on your next piece of work. This strategy is guaranteed to improve your marks!

If you're really not happy with your work, draw a line under what you've done and start again. Get a clear idea of what it is you're trying to say. Decide a good way to say that, make a plan and commit yourself to it.

Don't forget that there are very few academic disciplines in which you can get a mark of 100%. That's because academic study is about understanding that there are a range of possible right answers, rather than a single one. If you're looking for one perfect answer, you're approaching things the wrong way.

"I'll do anything except what I'm meant to be doing"

When you're supposed to be writing an essay, it's surprising how even tasks like bathing the dog become suddenly attractive!

There are many things that can distract us from study. Some we know are not really important (playing games, watching television etc). Others we think might be (shopping, voluntary work, exercising, helping friends etc). As yourself what would happen if you didn't do something. Think about your goals and with those in mind, ask yourself how much would it matter?

It's not that you shouldn't be doing these things, because you are allowed to have a life outside studying - in fact it's important that you do. The problem is when all the other things take up so much time that they push studying into the background.

The thing to remember is that studying is a significant occupation, like paid employment. It isn't a luxury that you can only allow yourself to indulge in once you've 'paid your dues' by doing chores. Remind yourself why you're at university, and how hard you worked to get here. Now you deserve the time to get a good result.

Try deciding on a fixed time when you will not study. Make it a time when you don't think well (perhaps after lunch?). Then you can put off reading email, doing chores, exercising and all the other 'important' things till then, and use your best thinking time for doing your best thinking!

