

## Planning timetables and schedules

Everyone knows that having timetables and schedules works, but not everyone makes them. Often that's because it's discouraging when you find they're too difficult to keep to. The key is to be realistic, and leave a bit of room for flexibility.

There are three kinds of timetable that are especially useful for students: **weekly**, **termly** and **project plans**. There is also information here on **working out priorities** and **using tools for planning**.

If you need a quick fix to get your time under control, try **The 5-Step Plan**.

### Making a weekly timetable

If you are taking a taught course, you probably already have a timetable of lecture, seminar or tutorial, and lab times. (If not, you can download [a blank timetable grid in Word here](#).) Work around these, and add any other fixed commitments like paid work, or regular sports events. Decide which of the times you have left are going to be study periods.

**A tip that really works is to think about when you work best. If your brain doesn't work so well after lunch, it won't be helpful to plan most of your study periods for the afternoon. Book in some time to 'not study' in your worst time for thinking, and use it for doing emails, chores, exercising etc.**

The number of study periods you need to include will depend on your course - if it's mostly independent study, you will need to book in more periods than if you're working in the lab most days. As a guide, universities generally say that you should consider full-time study as if it were a full-time job with flexible hours - about 30-35 hours study a week, including your lectures etc. It's more important to keep a tally of the number of hours you study than it is to stick to a Monday-Friday 9-5 routine. That means if you work best in the middle of the night, work then and sleep in - providing it's not the night before a 9am lecture.

Once you've worked out your regular study periods, it's a good idea to book in some 'overspill' time for especially heavy weeks. These are periods which you use for study only if you need them - they might include more evening and weekend times.

Setting study periods in advance has three advantages. It means not wasting time on deciding whether to work today or not. It makes it more likely that the time you spend studying will be effective, if you can plan to work at your best times. Above all, it reminds you that you shouldn't be studying all the time - you need time to relax in order to let your brain process new information.

### Making a termly timetable

Use a simple grid with columns for Week numbers or Dates, Deadlines, Targets and Things to remember. (There's [one here to download as a Word doc](#).) List fixed academic deadlines first - coursework submissions, exam periods, presentations, supervisions meetings etc. Add things you need to remember in the last column - family birthdays, sports events, extra work commitments etc.

You should be able to see now when your busy and quiet times are. Break down your big tasks into smaller steps and add in targets, for instance: 'Start reading for essay 1', 'Finish literature review', 'Proofread chapter'.

There's a **simpler grid here** arranged by module and week. It's up to you to choose the type of plan that suits you best.

**Try this - the Assignment Survival Kit from the University of Kent includes an assignment planning tool to help you work out the tasks you need to complete, and the time you have to do them in.**

One of the reasons timetables don't work is that we plan our time too rigidly and leave things till the last minute. When you're planning your workload always make sure that you build in some contingency time - extra time in case something goes wrong (your printer cartridge runs out, you can't get the book you need from the library, you come down with a belated case of Freshers' flu....). So set your own deadlines a few days before you actually have to hand work in, and work to them. If you finish early, you've got some time off!

### Using tools for planning

There are various tools you can use to help you keep track of your time. As each one works well for different purposes, it's best to use a combination.

**Diaries** are convenient and portable, but you can't get an instant overview of what you need to do.

**Wall planners** make your time commitments much more visible, but aren't as portable as diaries.

**Mobile phones** can be useful as portable short-term organisers, for daily to-do lists and reminders. If you're finding it difficult to find time for breaks, set an alarm to remind yourself to stop for a bit.

**Online calendars** make it easy to set up recurring events, and to get an overview, but are not always accessible. You can also use them when you're planning schedules for completing assignments, to keep lists of tasks and set up reminders for the dates they should be started.

### Working out priorities

It's often difficult to know where to start. How do you decide what to do first?

Try listing all the study tasks you would like to fit into your schedule. Break larger tasks down into smaller steps and think about which of these needs doing first. Then put them in order of importance.

Bear in mind not only when tasks should be done, but also how significant they are. For instance, reading to prepare for a lecture is unlikely to be more important than finishing a piece of assessed work. You can test this by asking yourself, "what would happen if I didn't do this?"

If you are feeling overwhelmed by work it can help you feel calmer if you get one small easy job done and finished. However, beware the classic trap of doing all the easy jobs first, then not having time for the more daunting tasks.

### Making a project timetable

Most coursework assignments are completed over a relatively short time. Dissertations and major projects are likely to be more spread out, perhaps even over more than a year. It's easy to keep telling yourself that there's plenty of time, right up to the moment when you realise that there isn't!

To plan a project timetable, you first need to decide on the tasks needed to complete the project. Then build them around any fixed deadlines (e.g. presentations on proposals or early results, draft chapters, final deadline etc).

A sample project plan might look like this:

<b>Start background research</b>	<b>End May</b>
<b>Presentation on proposal ready for -</b>	<b>30 June</b>
<b>Complete background research and decide on themes and methods</b>	<b>End Aug</b>
<b>Gather information</b>	<b>Sept - Nov</b>
<b>Draft chapter to show to supervisor for -</b>	<b>14 Dec</b>
<b>Finish first draft</b>	<b>End February</b>
<b>Edit/write final draft</b>	<b>End March</b>
<b>Proof read, bind and submit for -</b>	<b>15 April</b>