

Vassar College  
Counseling Service

**Procrastination**

*Introduction*

Procrastination is probably the single most common time management problem. Everyone procrastinates to some extent; however, there are several reasons why college students rank highly among those most vulnerable to procrastination:

1. There is always a tremendous amount of work to do. Regardless of how much time you spend studying, it can seem impossible to get "finished."
2. For most students, only a small number of hours each day are spent in classes and labs. The majority of time is unstructured, and you're responsible for deciding what to do and when to do it.
3. In the college environment, particularly in residence, there can be something more enjoyable to do than studying. Many activities compete for a limited number of hours in a week; studying is often pushed to the bottom of the list.
4. Procrastination is common among high-achieving and high-ability students because of its connection to perfectionism.

Given these conditions, it's easy to understand why procrastination is such a common problem for college students. Learning some strategies to control procrastination can help make getting started less painful and reduce falling behind. Good time management doesn't necessarily mean working harder or working more - it means working smarter. Here's how.

*Realistic Goal Setting*

One common reason for procrastinating is that often too much of the same activity must be done at one sitting. Rather than spending three hours in one evening reading fifty pages for Psychology, plan to read for one hour each day over three days. This is especially important for subjects that are difficult or unpleasant. If you spend thirty to sixty minutes each day, rather than leaving a week's work for one marathon session, you'll be far less likely to postpone doing the work.

*Plan to Work & Play*

In the section above we've used the term "plan" - something that is usually missing from the procrastinator's vocabulary. If you use the "I do whatever I feel like doing whenever I feel like doing it" method of time management, this scenario is probably familiar to you: you can't work effectively because your mind is on the other things you'd rather be doing, yet you feel guilty when you're not working because there's so much waiting to be done.

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Although there is something to be said for waiting for inspiration to strike, it is usually not a very efficient way to get things done. Planning does not mean rigid or elaborate scheduling, but it does require some skill and intelligent decision making. A good time plan is probably the single most effective way to control procrastination.

### *Make a Molehill*

Procrastination often results when the task seems difficult, unpleasant, or overpowering. You can bring the task down to size and make it less intimidating by using this method. As soon as you receive a big assignment, set aside a mere 10 or 15 minutes a day to work on it. By the end of one week, you'll have spent at least an hour on the task, and you may have found that it's not quite as scary as you thought. By spending only a few minutes each day, you are accomplishing a small, and therefore less intimidating, task - one that is less likely to get put off. Once you are involved and maybe even interested in the task, you may be motivated to spend more time on it. Be cautious, however, since very large tasks such as a thesis require larger blocks of time. Manageable, daily periods of work are the key, while starting early helps to ensure that due dates will be met.

### *Self Discipline?*

Students often blame their problems with procrastination on laziness or a lack of self discipline. However, the cause is usually not as simple as that. For example, there is an interesting connection between procrastination and perfectionism. Students for whom nothing less than an A will do may procrastinate on an assignment so that when their mark is not up to their standard, they can blame it on the fact that they did the assignment in a hurry. They create an emotional "out" - the low mark does not reflect their true ability, so there is no loss of self esteem.

Procrastination can sometimes be an indication of a fear of failure, or of disappointing family. Sometimes it is a symptom of a lack of motivation, the loss of a sense of purpose for being at college. In fact, there are many reasons why students procrastinate. The strategies in this handout can help with procrastination temporarily, but understanding why you procrastinate is essential for its long-term management.

### *Get Help*

Counseling Service staff members are available to meet with you to help you identify and work through the factors underlying your procrastination. Call x5700 to set up an appointment. The staff at the Teaching, Learning and Research Center can offer assistance and advice with controlling procrastination, time planning, and many other learning and study issues. Students can drop in, or make an appointment, call ext. 5215.

Adapted from the University of Guelph Learning Services webpage

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