

Time & task management

Getting it all together

Successfully balancing and juggling all of your priorities and commitments requires an organised approach to both time and task management.

Many students begin university with already busy lives; they have other important commitments or priorities in addition to the studies they take on.

Think about how many commitments and tasks you have to juggle and prioritise on any given day, in any given week. If you have a part-time or full-time job and are studying too, it will be difficult to balance the hours you work with your university schedule. If you are in a relationship, or living with family or friends, there are tasks to do with your personal life that you have to manage. Then there is just the time taken to travel between one place and another, whether that's work or home or somewhere else.

At university there are many commitments and deadlines relating to, for example, enrolment, managing fees or HECS or other finances, your timetable of classes, due dates for assignments, and exam dates and times. This is in addition to any extra-curricular activities you have involved yourself in (or want to) that demand time too.

What's your current approach?

Take some time to think about how YOU ordinarily manage time in your everyday life, as this is an important clue to the sort of time management issues you may be facing. Are you the sort of person who likes routine? Are you always on time? Do you like organising your time and writing up 'to do' lists? Are you able to prioritise tasks without any difficulty? Are you the kind of person who leaves things to the last minute, or someone who enjoys the challenge of a deadline? Do deadlines feel oppressive to you, or do you tend to procrastinate rather than take action?

Whichever sort of person you are, there will be challenges to face when you add university study to your life.



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Q: If you are travelling to Bali, when do you pack?

(Beware! Your answer will reveal your true self)

- a) one week before and leave the suitcase in the hall
- b) a couple of days ahead
- c) the night before
- d) as the taxi is pulling up

Successfully managing your time and your study is not about changing your answer to the 'when do you pack?' question. Instead, you need to understand the implications of your answer in terms of a realistic appraisal of your use of time and a realistic approach to time and task management. For example, those who pack at the last minute may have been packing the suitcase for days in their head, and may have organized the needed clothes and other items in advance.

It can be really helpful to ask others how they manage their time – not so that you can copy them, but so that you begin to recognise that managing time is personal. That said, there are a number of tried and tested ways to get organised and successfully manage both time and tasks.

Think about your priorities, the things that you have to do and the things you like to do and consider what is flexible and what is not. Write a list of all the activities you are currently involved in, the things that take up time and the things that you are perhaps not getting done (yet).

Getting down to it

Often, the worst part about having a lot to do is not the work itself but the worry associated with it. You need to find your own way of keeping track of what you have to do.

If you have to battle procrastination, it may be that you have not worked out a way of managing a task. Procrastination can be your mind's way of saying "I don't know how to start". It is not necessarily laziness – frequently, procrastinators can be very busy doing other things instead of the thing they should be doing.

Don't wait for the 'right time' to start work. Anything that you do toward completing a task helps you to finish it. Sometimes taking half an hour whenever you can may be the turning point to finishing.

A time management approach

Many students assume that study is about knowledge and subject content, but in fact the way to be a successful student is to know what to do with the information presented to you.

The essential element to managing time is to always know what you have to do, and to have a plan for when and how you are going to do it.

Develop the list habit

Use your diary, use a PDA, use a wall calendar, annotate a copy of your course outline with tasks and dates due, put a whiteboard in your room – any method or combination that works for you - and keep daily 'to do' lists.

Organise your timetable

1. Make sure you have your *Student diary* – it contains all the official university dates you will need to know – and/or have checked the university's website for 'key dates'. Note these down (<http://www.unimelb.edu.au/keydates/>).
2. Collect your course or subject outlines and make sure you have all the dates on which assignments and projects are due, and when exams are, or are likely to be, scheduled. Add these to your timetable or diary.
3. List all timetable commitments - lectures, tutorials, practicals, seminars, etc.
4. Add other fixed commitments (for example: paid work, house duties, sport, social events).
5. Look for blocks of time that can be used for study group meetings, researching in the library, reading and writing up your notes.

Let other people know your timetable

Managing study tasks has to be achieved in relation to the rest of your life. Fitting everything in means making choices and, as far as possible, knowing what lies ahead. Negotiate with the people in your life about what they want and what you need. Sometimes managing time successfully means saying "no" to friends, to family, or to overtime at work.

Discuss your study timetable with friends and family, place the timetable on the fridge or give them a copy - this can reduce the pressure you might find yourself working under, and the arguments when you refuse to go out too many times in a row.

Develop a regular study pattern

Do you work best in the morning, or late at night? Managing study will require you to find a rhythm for your work that best suits you, with room for making extra time as required. Establishing a regular pattern of work can help get you into a routine. This allows you to feel more in control, to fit all tasks required into the time available and to maximize your time use.

A task management approach

An alternative way to reframe the idea of time management is to stop thinking about how long it takes to do something and focus attention on what you want to do (the task). If you manage the task, the time will often manage itself. The stress you feel in relation to time is not time itself but the task that remains undone. Getting on with the task is the best way to manage time.

Divide the task into useful smaller tasks

When trying to manage time, the easiest way to fail is not to be specific enough in planning a series of tasks. For example:

Monday

- 2pm Physics
- 2.30pm Biology

x

There is not enough detail here to ensure that you have the relevant material with you or that you have a clear idea of what you want to achieve.

Compare that approach to this:

Monday

- break down essay question
- write a rough plan of issues
- borrow books on reading list
- read 2 articles

✓

There are 24 hours in every day and so your priority here is to complete these specific tasks. This approach means that you can be flexible about the order in which you do these tasks, but you have noted that these tasks should be finished on Monday. If Tuesday arrives and these tasks are not completed then they should be added to Tuesday's list, re-evaluated or removed.

Reading and note-taking

Students frequently complain that they have spent massive amounts of time reading but they can't remember anything the next day. Note-taking can help with this problem as it provides a bridge between reading (now) and revising for an exam or writing an assignment (later).

Essay writing

Managing time around the task of writing an essay means planning each of the steps in the process so that you always know what you need to be doing. For example:

- Read the question
- Rewrite the question in your own words and break it down into issues that need addressing
- Find and prepare (borrow or photocopy) the reading materials you need
- Take notes, use a notebook or computer and keep good records of what you are reading, e.g. author, date, title publisher and place. (This way you won't need to return to the library. Using a notebook or computer instead of bits of paper can save time when you are looking for that fantastic quote you remember reading)
- Start writing early. Write your first draft, and then put it aside for a few days before returning to edit it. This allows time to reflect on what you have written

Finally:

Remember to keep balance in your life. If you have chosen to go out socially instead of studying, don't waste that time worrying about not studying. Plan to get back to the books the next day.