Managing your time
What’s this guide about?

Do you manage your time or does time manage you? Use this guide to help you improve your effectiveness by prioritising and planning your time wisely and dealing with those things that are holding you back.

Time management is the process of deciding what you need to get done, planning the order in which you will do tasks, and making sure that they are completed on schedule.

Good time management skills are important not just in your studies but in other areas of your life. Planning your objectives and goals within a specific timeframe will mean that you are more likely to reach your targets and complete tasks on time or even ahead of schedule. As a result, you will get more time to enjoy other things in life that are important to you.

However, managing your time is easier said than done. University and life can throw many obstacles at you: multiple deadlines, work, social commitments. Sometimes finding the right balance can feel like a constant battle and this is where effective time management can help.

So, how do you develop effective time management skills?

In this guide we’re going to focus on identifying some of the obstacles that might be stopping you from working smarter and recommending some strategies and tools to help you overcome these obstacles. The end result: better organisation of your time and a healthier work-life balance.
Introduction

Time is a valuable resource that you need to use well. But nobody is born with good or bad time management skills - our study habits are developed over a period of time. By making small changes however, you can make great strides with your work and studies. Remember that you are in control of your time and you have the power to make changes so that you can get more done in less time and be more effective. Failing to manage your time can damage your effectiveness and lead to you feeling stressed or anxious.

Know what you want to achieve and pick a strategy that works for you – if it doesn’t work try something else that does and move on! Read on to find out how to reflect on where your time goes and how to become more productive by using your time wisely.

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Work-life balance - setting priorities

Reflecting on how you currently spend your time is a really important start. You can then begin to make the changes necessary to form an effective strategy for getting your tasks done on time. Some of these statements might be familiar to you …

What are your priorities? As a way of mapping your time, take a look at the following matrix tool. Decide what is urgent and what can wait, then plan what you do first.

- **In Box 1**, marked “urgent and important” are examples of the most pressing tasks. These are your priority activities.
- **Box 4** “not urgent and less important“ contains the things we do when we need a break or we are tired, but be aware it can also be a place where we accidentally spend a lot of our time.
- We do need to do some things that are in **Box 2** but we also need to cut down on those tasks in **Box 3**.
If this method works for you try building it into your weekly routine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>URGENT</th>
<th>NOT URGENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IMPORTANT</td>
<td>IMPORTANT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutorial preparation for a looming deadline</td>
<td>Reading lecture notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam revision</td>
<td>Personal development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family emergency</td>
<td>Exercise / staying healthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last minute preparation for an event or presentation</td>
<td>Planning time / goal setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>LESS IMPORTANT</td>
<td>LESS IMPORTANT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background research</td>
<td>Background research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some meetings</td>
<td>Some meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some emails and phone calls</td>
<td>Some emails and phone calls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping a friend with a relationship problem</td>
<td>Helping a friend with a relationship problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catching up with missed TV programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some phone calls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Checking your social media messages</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from the Time management matrix as described by Covey and Merrill (1994) in “First things first”.
Other “stuff” that can hold you back

Although you may know what your priorities are you may still find you are distracted by other things. Avoiding what needs to be done or procrastinating can mean that you lose focus and this can really soak up your time. To build better study habits think about some of the following:

**Study environment** – ensure your desk is tidy and organised **before** you start to study so that you can focus on your work rather than searching for pens, notes and books.

**Get motivated** – use a new route to work or university to stimulate your brain and recharge your thinking powers. Do you have a study buddy you can start your work with? Sharing ideas and talking about your work with someone else or a group will make it seem less overwhelming.

**Delegate** – do you feel like you have taken on too much? Then share some tasks with others. You can return the favour later on when you have more time.

**Saying ‘no’** – remember that it is ok to say ‘no’ to other tasks or calls on your time – negotiate what you can and can’t do and be responsible for yourself. Saying ‘yes’ is a good thing but saying it all of the time can be counter-productive. Remember the priority matrix.

**Put your phone away** – before you start your work, switch off distracting apps/social media accounts on your phone for short periods if you can. Put your phone out of sight. You will have plenty of time to check it when you have done a chunk of study – think of this as a reward for spending time working.
If you are still having difficulty getting started there are also some helpful apps that can help you along the way such as:

**Finish** – a to-do list app for procrastinators. This tool allows you to set short, mid and long-term tasks. The different settings allow you to look at everything at once or just focus on more pressing deadlines. A “Bother Me” switch allows you to be bothered every hour to finish a task.

**Mindly** - helps you organise your thoughts in a more three-dimensional manner than a to-do list. This app helps you create quick summaries, plan projects and add associations to keep you organised. It can also be shared with friends and colleagues.

For more strategies on how to deal with issues around concentration and where to seek help take a look at our **Staying focused while studying** guide in this study skills series.

**Planning your time**

We’ve looked at managing priorities and how to deal with some things that hold you back, now let’s look at how you plan your work within the time slots you have available.

**Using a diary or a planner**

Sound familiar? If you use a diary or a planner you can plan a week, month or a semester ahead. You might want to plan backwards from a deadline so that you can visualise exactly what needs to be done in the time. Think about those assignment deadlines, exam dates and lectures. Start to enter any other work you do - don’t forget to add the time spent at any sports or social clubs you belong to and include time for cooking, eating, exercise, regular family commitments, and other social or free time. It is important to be realistic about the time you spend on different activities or tasks.
You may wish to use a portable printed diary, a wall planner, or download a timetable template such as the one below:

https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/studentservices/documents/blankweeklytimetable.pdf

Colour coding can be used for formal tasks such as lectures, seminars and lab work. Don’t forget to include time for socialising, sleeping, eating, fitness, shopping, housework and part-time work – these timeslots can also be colour-coded.

**Assignment Planner** which allows you to set your start date and hand-in date and suggests a plan for you which includes researching, drafting, writing, proofreading and writing up your references within the timeframe.

If you are working on your dissertation then our **Dissertation Planner** is the tool to use.

Don’t forget to add in other areas such as revision, prep for assignments and organising your work in physical or online folders as this will speed up your efficiency later. It is also a good idea to have some flexibility or contingency built into your plan so that, if anything unexpected occurs, you have time to deal with it.

**Your work environment**

Once you have decided on a planning tool or diary that works for you, start to think about your environment. Keep it varied. If you need to complete a project with friends or colleagues then try using a group study area, virtual or physical so that you can discuss ideas and practice presenting. If you need to travel regularly between sites, work, and university, think about using time on the bus for reading or drafting a mind map for an essay, or, if you are driving and need to concentrate, listening to a useful podcast/audio book.

**When is a good time?** – choose a good time to do your study. Recognise times when you feel tired and use these periods to do low energy work such as labelling folders and organising notes. Do high value work during times when your energy levels are at their peak – you will be much more productive.
How long should I study? – break larger projects down into smaller manageable ones. Think about “chunking” similar tasks together, starting perhaps with background reading and note-making work, then your writing tasks followed by a break, and then perhaps move on to computer based work. Decide how long the small chunks of time will last before you break. Try the popular Pomodoro Technique which uses a pattern of 25 minutes of work followed by a 5 minute break and possibly a reward to recharge before you start work again.

If you struggle with juggling a number of deadlines or tasks try Personal Kanban. This technique allows you to visualise the amount of work you have, and the way that work is carried out. Personal Kanban is also scalable. It can work with just you, or with your family or even with work groups.

Organising your ‘things’ – we talked earlier about organising notes and labelling files during your downtime. This can be a helpful activity that will improve your productivity later on. Having well-ordered storage areas can save you time and unnecessary searching. You might want to colour code folders, use dividers and tags within box files, or use different coloured sticky notes to label articles you want to refer back to in your notes.

If you prefer online organizing try the following apps which may help:

Evernote – allows you to gather all your notes, thoughts and ideas in one place across many devices

Google keep – a sleek pin board style app – allows you to pin notes, make lists and add photos onto a well-designed and easily updateable homepage.
Lastly, think about planning a “landing strip” area at home for when you come in, so it stays organized, and you don’t forget things as you leave the house. It can be a set of hooks or trays that hold your keys, phone, calculators, shoes, textbooks/notes, rucksack, memory sticks, headphones etc. This a simple but effective way of ensuring you don’t waste time trying to locate your important “stuff”.

Common mistakes

Late submission
Using a planner will allow you to set enough time to go over your work thoroughly before a hand in deadline. Remember, in many cases you need to leave enough time to submit your work online via e-submission through Turnitin or e-Assignment. See the guidance on Turnitin for Students to find out what steps you need to take around the submission process.

Academic integrity breaches – taking responsibility for managing your time well and organising your work, keeping records of your sources and fully acknowledging the work of others, are key to ensuring that you follow good academic practice. Poor time management could mean you miss noting the correct references, or copy a quotation or source incorrectly simply because you were rushing to finish an assignment. Giving yourself time at the end of the writing process to check your sources thoroughly will help you avoid both plagiarism, and breaching the University of Southampton regulations and
guidance on academic integrity. For more information on the University expectations in this area follow the Academic Integrity Guidance for Students

Asking for help

There may be times when you feel you are overwhelmed by your workload, or you are feeling stressed and can’t concentrate, or there may something out of your control that has happened in your life which has affected your work.

There are many people in the University who can help and support you. Talk to your Personal Academic Tutor as soon as possible as they offer one-to-one support and advice throughout your time at the University, and will support you in your studies or with other issues you may have.

Enabling Services, Student Life and the Faith and Reflection Centre are also services you can call on amongst others - take a look at our Support Services Guide for more details. For free, independent and confidential support try the Students' Union Advice Centre

For help with planning and writing dissertations and essays, referencing, research and general study skills check our Academic Skills Website.

If you have more minor worries but really need someone to talk to, try asking friends and colleagues for help as they may be able to listen, build your confidence and help you get back on track.
Summary

Recognising that time is a limited resource and that you have the power to make changes in order to get things done more effectively, is crucial. This guide should help you take control, reach your goals and achieve a better work-life balance.

Here’s a final recap of the main points:

Be organised – plan your work over a week, month or semester. Include assignment deadlines, exam times and lectures. Be realistic and include work and social or free time.

Getting started – set clear realistic goals and split larger tasks into manageable ones. If there are things you don’t like doing, try putting these at the beginning of the work /study session. Get them finished while your energy levels are high.

Prioritise – decide what is urgent and what can wait then plan what you can do first.

Learn to say ‘no’ – recognise the calls on your time and make changes. Remember saying ‘yes’ all of the time can be counter-productive. Take responsibility for yourself.

Variety is the spice of life – try to vary your work and chunk like tasks together. After longer periods of work, review what you have done. If your concentration is flagging, stop, and do simpler tasks that are useful but can be achieved during periods of low energy.

Take breaks and learn to relax - find out what helps you relax and add it to your planner or diary.

Reference