

Procrastination

“Rule your mind or it will rule you” Horace

Procrastination is a serious problem for college students. It is easy to put something off until later thinking that you have plenty of time to get to it. However, you will often find that when you wait too long you will compromise quality (either knowingly or unknowingly). Procrastination is the habit of avoiding or delaying something that needs your attention. Researchers report that some college students spend up to one third of their time on activities related to procrastination. Many of these students know that their habit of procrastination is a serious problem; they just don't know how to overcome it.

It is also important to understand that procrastination can take many forms. Sometimes it is large-scale procrastination. An example might be when you have a paper due on Monday morning, but go skiing with friends all weekend instead of staying behind and working. However, there is also small scale procrastination. This is when your friends invite you to go skiing, and you decline to stay behind and work on your essay. However, every fifteen minutes you check their status updates on social media. With small scale procrastination, people usually have the appearance of working and feel exhausted at the end of the day, but still little was accomplished. Researchers describe this fatigue as cognitive switching penalty, which results from a person's brain having to switch tasks as opposed to staying focused for extended periods of time. Research has shown that it takes more time to complete a task when we allow our focus to drift and that this cognitive switching penalty takes more time as the tasks become more difficult and causes us to error more.

In pairs or small groups, discuss some of the reasons why you procrastinate. Also, discuss strategies for avoiding procrastination.

There are many ways to break the bad habit of procrastination. One is to commit to a time management program. Josh Kaufman, author of *The Personal MBA*, describes the idea of pre-committing to a task, establishing personal consequences for forgetting or procrastinating, and a reward for completing the task. Charles Duhigg talks about similar ideas in *The Power of Habit*. Duhigg describes the idea of developing a cue, routine, and reward where a person develops a system that reminds him or her when it is time to perform a task, develops a routine, and then sets up a system of small rewards for completing the task. Using the program above, one example might be when you have an essay due on Monday you automatically schedule time to write on Saturday morning from 10:00 – 12:00. You may also have regular writing times with project group members scheduled from 2:00-4:00. When your friends come and ask you to go skiing, you know that writing times are already written in your agenda. Also in your agenda is going out with your writing friends for tacos at 5:00 to celebrate finishing the essay. It is much easier to say no to skiing when you have these commitments and rewards already scheduled.

A good first step to overcoming procrastination is to identify distractions. Using the chart below, identify some distractions you face when it comes to getting work done and what level the distraction is (high, medium, low). Identify possible solutions.

Distraction	Level or distraction	Possible solution
Texting/messaging		
Social media		
TV/Streaming video		
Video games		
Friends		
Sports/hobbies		
Shopping		
Meals/snacking		
Errands/household chores		
Family obligations		
Day dreaming		
Others (Write In)		

Some ways to avoid distractions and beat procrastination might be:

- Remind yourself of your goals and priorities (review the previous list)
- Create a daily to-do list
- Schedule time in your agenda for jobs due before their deadline.
- Break big jobs up into smaller easy to do tasks
- Put your phone in a different room or use the do not disturb function or a similar type app
- Schedule time to work in a distraction free environment like the library or a coffee shop
- Ask friends, family, or roommates to keep you on track

In pairs or small groups, discuss some ways you could develop routines or cues and rewards that could help you develop good work habits. Which distractions are hardest for you to overcome? What techniques on the list do you think might work for you?