



Durham
University

Counselling Service

Procrastination

Putting Things Off

One of the commonest problems worrying students is the tendency to put things off until the last moment - or to beyond the last moment.

Signs of Putting things off

- Are you often waiting for the “right moment” to start or for inspiration to strike you?
- Does the need to tidy your room become irresistible whenever you contemplate getting down to work?
- Do you stare at a blank piece of paper rather than being able to start writing?

If you answered yes to these questions, you may well have developed the habit of putting things off.

Some Causes of Procrastination

Understanding some of the causes can help you look at constructive solutions.

Lack of self-confidence: Studying is made more difficult if you see the natural problems that arise as a sign that you are not a very good student, rather than just as a sign that the work itself is hard. Perfectly able students can convince themselves that they are “impostors” who do not deserve to be at university at all because they are not finding the work easy. Recognising that it is not meant to be easy, but challenging, can help.

Getting Overwhelmed: If we sit down to write an essay and find there is a lot to research, it is natural to feel a bit swamped.

Unrealistic Expectations: Some people decide they should never get less than full marks and that any grade below a first is a mark of personal failure.

By leaving everything to the last moment we can keep alive the hope that we really could get a first in everything if we just got started.

Breaking the Habit

Putting things off can become a habit, and it can be difficult to take the first step towards breaking it, so...

Do Something ... Anything ... Now: Learning to get started without ceremony is one of the main skills of time management.

- Do not wait for the moment “to be right” before you start work.
- Use an odd half-an-hour to read a book and make some notes.
- Start an essay in the middle if this is easier than starting with the introduction.

Don't Stop Because Something Is Difficult: If you come up against an obstacle, look for a way round it. For example if you cannot seem to get the structure of an essay right, make a rough outline and show it to the lecturer or talk it through with a friend.

Make a List and a Timetable: List what you have to do and make a sensible estimate of how long it will take. Then draw up a squared plan to represent the next few weeks, mark the deadlines and fit everything in. It might be a painful process but it will soon give you a sense of direction.

Set realistic targets: Don't set yourself up to fail by setting unreasonable and unachievable targets for yourself, and imagining that you can study for very long hours on a regular basis. Give yourself generous time off in your study timetable. This can be a reward if you do well and can be used to complete work if a totally unexpected event has thrown you off course.

Don't Aim for the Impossible: Work out realistically what standard you can achieve and start working towards that. It might be disappointing to

decide you might only get a lower second, but a lower second in your hand is probably distinctly better than the first that exists only in your dreams.

Consider your Lifestyle: It is difficult to organise your work if you tend to sleep in an unplanned way and so cannot predict when your day will start. Staying up late then sleeping late, becomes a difficult cycle to break. The best way is to plan to get up early, irrespective of when you went to bed. Try not to sleep during the day even if you feel tired. This will help you slowly to get your normal daily cycle back.

Aim to Get More Organised: Research shows that the less worrying distractions there are, the better we work. Therefore aim for a clear desk, sorted notes, clear priorities and so on. The more you can focus your mind, the better you will perform. However do not substitute tidying up your room and sorting out your notes for doing some actual work or you will never get started. Keep tidying and listing as a relaxing task to be done at the end of a day's work.

Find Help if Needed

There is no shame in finding studying difficult. It isn't meant to be easy, so try not to be too proud to ask for assistance

- It can help to talk a difficult piece of work through with friends or peers on your course. They might even welcome it because they are finding it hard too!
- Academic staff can help with support and advice if you are confused about a piece of work. It might help to get something down on paper, however brief, before you see them, to remind you of what you are thinking.
- If you feel it would help to talk through things with a counsellor, please make an appointment.

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