

Student Assignment or Project Guide

Creating a Project Plan

A summary of the process to follow is outlined below. For full details and examples, see the free download including the example and templates.

The Topic

So where to start? The starting point should always be to decide what you want to achieve. Sometimes there is a clear concise explanation of what the assignment or project is all about. Other times it is vague. Start by summarizing in a few sentences what the assignment topic is all about.

What are we supposed to get out of this Assignment

The assignment is being carried out to establish the existence of some skills. For example, you may be being assessed to research a topic using a number of different sources, and present a sound case for a particular point of view. What you are supposed to get out of the assignment is different to the topic. The topic is the material you end up with. The skills you learn while doing the assignment is why you are being asked to complete it.

What are the Things you have to Hand In.

Hopefully this will be easy to identify however sometimes it is a little vague and some further questions may be required of the person setting the assignment. Deliverables can be essays, models, presentations, speeches etc.

What are the Steps to create the Things you will Hand In

List out the steps to create each deliverable. For example for an essay, there might be research, first draft, second draft, review etc.

Estimate the Time for each Step

Some of the estimates will be easy to make and some a guess. Just give it your best shot. When you have made your estimate, note down a confidence level. 0% means you know exactly how long it will take. 100% means it could take half as long, or twice as long as you estimate. Don't go over 100%.

Now pick the mid point between the estimate and the worst case based on the confidence level. If you said 4 days but confidence was 50%, the worst case is 6 days. The mid point is 5 days.

Work out your Time Available

You have a deadline. Work out how much time you plan to devote between now and the deadline. For example you might plan to spend 2 hrs a night on Tue/Wed/Thur which gives 6 hours a week. Also note down the assumptions you are basing the estimate on.

Decide the Sequence of the Work

Look at your steps, and work out the order in which they will happen. Some steps can usually be performed in parallel.

Select Milestones

Probably the biggest problem we have in achieving time based goals is to focus on how long each task should take, rather than milestones along the way. A milestone is a black or white point where we deliver a component of the assignment. It may take the completion of one or many activities before the milestone is reached.

It is important that we pick a point that is easily measured - not something like 40% of the draft complete. It might be completion of research, finish the first draft, or have a layout in place. Ideally these should occur at least every 7 to 10 days to keep you focused.

Create your Personal Schedule

Now comes the real work. This entails creating a schedule for the duration of the project. The inputs for this schedule are:

- The activities or steps
- The mid point estimated times
- The sequence
- The time available

Also focus on spare time each day or week. Get as much done early in the assignment, and leave the spare time until last. You will need it when the unforeseen occurs.

Manage Risks

What we need to do is to brainstorm what could go wrong before we start. When we come up with a risk, we need to look at:

- **Impact.** What impact will it have on our project. (High, Medium or Low)
- **Probability.** How likely is it to happen (High, Medium or Low)

Where a risk has two highs (It is highly likely to happen, and it will have a high impact) we need to look at what we can do about it. Depending on the size of the project, we might also want to look at high/medium and medium/medium risks.

Manage the Schedule

A plan is not static. Things are bound to change. The schedule is not just something you file away and forget. As the weeks pass, constantly review the schedule. Enter the actual time you spend. Adjust the time estimates if you find they have changed. Manage yourself to the schedule. Importantly, focus on the next milestone. Work towards the next milestone and adopt the railway station approach. Provided you go through each station on time, you will get to your destination on time.

10 Tips

The following are a list of tips. They are in no particular order. They cover many of the traps that people fall into when carrying out projects or assignment. Hopefully they will help you when your time comes to undertake a project or student assignment.

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1. The first thing you should do in any school project is to draw up a plan of what you have to do, and when you are going to do it. Also work out when you cannot do anything. Note down time that is not available.

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2. Set yourself milestones. These are points where parts of the project are completed. Milestones should be clearly achieved. For example, finishing most of the research is not a milestone. Finishing all the research is a milestone.

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3. Milestones should be typically 3 to 7 days apart. If they are longer, you run the risk of going a few weeks without any indication of whether you are on time or not.

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4. Aim to finish around three quarters of the way through the project. Rarely do things go as planned. You are bound to find either the work is more than estimated, or the time you thought you had available is taken up with other things.

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5. When you draw up a plan, understand you don't know everything you have to do. You might say you need to read a section of a book, but when you do, it leads to further reading. You can't know about the further reading until you complete the first step. Build in contingency time.

Think of it as walking down a tunnel with a flash light. You can see ahead the first few feet, but beyond that, it is murky. When you get further down the tunnel, you can see details you couldn't see earlier. Don't think you know all the details when you are at the entrance of the tunnel.

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6. Stress and good results don't often go hand in hand. Being under stress to meet a deadline, rarely produces a good result.

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7. Typically 5% to 15% of the mark comes from having the time to review the draft product, and make adjustments. If you don't have that time, you are penalizing yourself before you start.

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9. Understand roles and responsibilities. If you are doing everything yourself, it is clear. If several people are collaborating, make it clear who is doing what. It is a double edged sword. Either things fall between the cracks which leads to tension, or two people try to do the same thing which also results in tension.

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9. Expect things to go wrong. Ask yourself how often things happen without a hitch? If the answer is 'not often' then learn from the past. Expect there to be hiccups. Make allowance for these hiccups in your planning, and when they happen, don't stress about it. Never get caught saying 'If everything goes to plan, I will just make it.' You are really saying, 'I know it will probably not go to plan so I will probably fail.'

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10. Remember tension builds tension. If you are stressed and get short with people around you, they will get short with you. This develops into a spiral of escalating stress. Walk away for a few moments when it gets too stressful and back off the people around you. The spiral can go down as well as up.

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