

When you're back in school, you don't ever kill time. You make it come alive.

*Jessie Almarado,
student*

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING TIME AND STRESS

Most adults who return to school become part-time students, continuing their full-time lives on the job and at home. Attending an out-of-town meeting means a night of skipping homework, shopping for groceries competes with studying for an exam, doing laundry may seem more urgent than reading a textbook, and coaching your child's soccer team eats into the time you need to write a paper. If there is one thing that adult students have in common, it's a need to become expert time managers.

Time pressure contributes to many students' feelings of stress—but it is hardly the only cause. Some students feel the pressure to prove themselves in an academic setting; others feel anxious about not having the skills necessary for college-level work. Some students bring stresses from other parts of their lives—family and work, for example—to their college work.

In this chapter, you'll find:

- suggestions for time management
- advice for procrastinators
- advice for perfectionists
- advice on managing stress

TIME COMMITMENTS OF BEING A STUDENT

Attending class is only part of a student's time commitment. Yet even attending class involves more than the one or two hours that the class meets: You may need to allow time for commuting and parking, checking in with your instructor, talking to classmates, stopping to pick up a library book. One class hour, then, sometimes means devoting two or three hours of out-of-class time. And there's more.

Purchasing books and supplies. Before the course begins, allow yourself a few hours to gather the materials you will need to keep up with class readings and discussions.

Reading and studying. For every hour that you spend in class, allow at least two hours a week for reading, studying, note-taking, and review. If you are taking a class that meets for three hours, from 6:00 to 9:00 once a week, for example, you should count on spending an additional six hours in preparation.

Special projects. You may be a fast typist, but writing a college paper involves more than typing: You need to allow time for reading, research, thinking, planning, drafting, and revising. In the week or two before a paper is due, plan on spending blocks of two to three hours for several days.

Special class projects sometimes involve collaborative work with classmates. If such projects are part of the course requirements, allow several two- or three-hour blocks of time for the evenings or weekends when you will meet.

Test preparation. If your course requires a midterm or final examination, allow yourself some two- or three-hour blocks of time during the week before the exam to review readings and notes, learn new material, and memorize information.

TEN HINTS FOR TIME MANAGEMENT

On the next few pages, you'll find ten suggestions from experienced adult students who have faced the same concerns about time management that you likely are facing now.

1. Be Realistic

"My advice comes from my role as an advisor to adults returning to school as undergraduates," says Kimberly Parke. "Do not overestimate your ability to juggle work, family, and school. Do not take on a full-time school program if you are working full-time, never mind if you have a family. Test the waters first: Take one class and work your way up to more classes. This will give you a chance to evaluate the school as well as your own abilities. Don't think, 'Well, it took me ten years

to begin my degree, so I want to complete it as soon as possible.' Don't rush through school—it will be at the expense of your job, family, and well-being.”

Being realistic also means that you may have to give up a leisure activity, such as a hobby or club, and substitute your classes and homework.

2. Build in “Safe Time”

There are bound to be times when you can't refuse family obligations, when you must work overtime, when you or someone in your family becomes ill, when a snowstorm keeps you from going to the library, or when your car breaks down on the way to class. To avoid panic, student advisor Kimberly Parke counsels students to build in buffers.

Building in buffers means keeping up with—or keeping ahead of—your class requirements. It also means setting aside some flexible time, as Clare Keller has done: “I try to devote certain days of the week to certain aspects of my life in a regular manner and to be as focused as possible on the tasks of each day. But I keep one day unscheduled in terms of outside responsibilities. This is usually my best study day.”

Susan Bell calls these buffers “wiggle room.” “As a television producer,” she says, “I got used to handling several different projects at one time. I was always careful to avoid conflicting deadlines and never to promise something unless I was reasonably certain I could deliver. I was also careful to include enough ‘wiggle room’ to allow for family crises, getting sick, doing the laundry, and the millions of other things that have to be dealt with even if you are a hot-shot television producer. When I could, I would hire other people to do things that I did not absolutely have to do myself. School for me was not much different from television: a lot of projects that needed to be planned and executed more or less simultaneously, with enough breathing room to allow for emergencies and just taking care of life.”

3. Keep a Planner

“I used to keep a day planner that was literally my Bible—in size and weight, to say the least,” one student reported. “I lugged this tome with me everywhere and had no problems filling up each page (which represented one whole day) with a list of many, many tasks to complete by the end of that day. But I found that I had more space in the planner than I had time or energy in a day. So I purchased a new planner—one as slim as my checkbook—where the week was displayed over two pages. The smaller size forced me to reorganize my tasks so that I spread them out over the week. Seeing how much time I had to fulfill obligations over a week instead of focusing intently on one day not only helped me allocate my time better but eased my anxiety about the amount of things I had to do each day.”

4. Find a Space

It can be a real desk in your own study, but just as likely, you'll find that you work at the dining room table or in a corner of the family room. Wherever you work, organize the space to support your efforts. Ask other family members or housemates to recognize your space as yours—at least when you're using that space for your class work.

5. Look at the Big Picture

"My advice to new students," says Cynthia Fowler, "is to map out their program of study so that they know their exact graduation date. Holding on to this concrete date can often be a motivator when the task seems overwhelming. As an additional motivator, I kept a small notebook dedicated to charting my progress; at the end of each term, I documented the courses I had completed, checking off degree requirements fulfilled and generally taking inventory of my accomplishments for that term. I tried to remind myself as often as necessary that if I completed the class I was enrolled in, I would be that much closer to achieving my goal."

6. Speak Up About Your Concerns and Commitments

"The most effective strategy that I developed for time management and organization of work, family, and school has been to communicate with my spouse and to plan ahead," advises Keren McGinity. "For example, I would tell my husband about a course, that the syllabus looked a bit daunting, and that I felt anxiety about how I would accomplish everything. We would then discuss the upcoming family commitments and ongoing house chores and devise a plan whereby the workload was evenly divided. When I needed to study for an exam or to write a paper, I would tell my husband about it early in the week so that he would know I would be occupied all weekend; we would pick a date in the future when we could spend some quality time together."

7. Work a Little Every Day

You may not have a two-hour block of time each day to devote to studying, reading, or writing, but you may have one half-hour—as part of your lunch break, on the bus to work, or after putting the children to bed. Use that half-hour productively by breaking down a big task into smaller, manageable tasks:

- Review class notes.
- Take notes from assigned readings.
- Make a plan for library research.
- Read a section of a long reading assignment.

8. Make a Checklist Each Week

Each time you can cross off a task, you will feel a definite sense of accomplishment. The key is to keep the list *short*.

9. Just Say No

"Social events must be kept to a minimum, and saying no to invitations by friends was honestly one of the most difficult parts of getting through the program," says Cynthia Fowler. "Like me, most of my friends work full-time, so I did not have the luxury of being in an environment where studying for exams and writing papers were the norm. As a part-time student, I was alone in dedicating my weekends to study and research." That dedication is necessary, though, and so is refusing some—but not all—of the social activities that may have filled your free time.

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10. Get a Study Buddy

Checking in with a classmate before a class meeting may help you both to feel motivated. Because you both are dealing with the same course, you can share strategies for studying, complain about some assignments, and generally cheer each other up. Some students find it helpful to study for exams with a classmate, testing each other on material and sharing notes.

PROCRASTINATION

The procrastinator never does today what can be put off until tomorrow. If you know that procrastination has been a problem in your past academic career, you may want to discuss the issue with an advisor or counselor at your college.

Students often procrastinate when they are afraid of failure: It feels safer not to do the work than to do it and be unsuccessful. Breaking down the study, writing, and review processes often gives procrastinators a feeling of control over the task before them. In Chapters 6, 7, and 8, you'll find the processes of reading, research, and writing broken down into small, manageable tasks so these processes don't seem so daunting.

PERFECTIONISM

Sometimes adult students set impossibly high standards for their own work for a variety of reasons:

- They're paying for their education themselves and feel that earning anything less than an A will make it seem as if they are wasting their money.

- They see grades as justification for their decision to return to school and, therefore, want instructors to confirm their decision with an A.
- They are adults—mature, motivated, hardworking—and believe they should do better than they did when they were younger students.
- They may be older than some of their instructors and equate age with intelligence and ability.
- They know they will share their grades with their companion or child(ren), and they want to feel proud of their achievement.
- They are focused on the product—the paper or exam—not on the process of learning.

Perfectionism is a cause of stress for many students. “The biggest problem I have had as an adult student,” Linda Karlsson Carter told us, “has been trying to maintain an unreasonably high standard for my coursework. I wanted to be the perfect student. After two years in school, I decided it was perfectly acceptable to be a B+ student. I knew I couldn’t be an exceptional student, an attentive mother, and a productive employee at the same time. When I understood what my priorities were, things began to balance out. I figured I could repeat a course if I failed, but my children would never be 10 and 12 again.”

Perfectionism makes it difficult to study and to write. Fear of failure—even if the failure means earning a B instead of an A—gets in the way of learning and can cause continual stress. Perfectionist students are afraid to write (because every word will be judged), afraid to take exams, sometimes even afraid to contribute to class discussions. If being a perfectionist gets in the way of doing your work, talk with a college advisor. Perfectionists may find these tips helpful:

- **Make sure you understand all assignments.** Clarify requirements by asking questions after class, by phone, or by e-mail.
- **Find a peer reader or study buddy.** This individual can help you study and learn class material, discuss your assignments with you, read and comment on your drafts, and so forth.
- **Ask instructors for specific feedback on papers.** Some instructors offer only brief comments about the weaknesses of a paper. If you have specific concerns—about your argument, organization, or particular points—attach a note to your paper when you hand it in. Your instructor’s response will help you to improve future papers.
- **Put coursework in perspective.** Besides talking about concerns with a friend or classmate, keeping a journal may help you reflect on your intellectual growth as you move from course to course. A journal helps you to consider all aspects of the course—lectures, writing, talking with classmates, reading—and not to focus solely on the tasks that are judged by the instructor. What about the course is satisfying? Important? Fun?

"I believe the biggest obstacle for a new student is overcoming fear," Linda Karlsson Carter admitted. "I was afraid of failing, afraid I had lost my ability to learn, afraid my family would suffer. Time is the only remedy for fear. I knew that if I continued taking courses, it had to get easier and less stressful, and it did. The only way to overcome fear was to plow right through obstacles. One has to accept that being fearful is a natural part of doing something new; I would rather be fearful than regretful."

"If there is one piece of advice that I would offer to new students, it would be to try to think of everything in terms of *process*," adds Keren McGinity. "It is not as important to get through an exam or to finish a paper as it is to appreciate what you learn either while you are studying or during the research and writing stages. After all, you are doing this for yourself. When preparing to meet with a professor or an advisor, it is easy to dwell on the 'right' questions to ask or responses to give, but it is more rewarding to realize that after the meeting, you will have taken steps toward your goal. In other words, the journey is the most challenging and exciting part, the destination is a by-product. Most importantly: Enjoy it!"

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SIX TIPS FOR MANAGING STRESS

Stress does not simply mean being busy, juggling competing responsibilities, or working hard as you strive toward a goal. Stress usually is associated with a feeling of lack of control over one's life. It often leads to physical responses that may involve heart rate, muscle tension, and gastrointestinal problems. Stress often is compounded by feelings of anxiety and sometimes depression.

If stress becomes debilitating and unrelenting, you may want to seek help from a counselor or medical practitioner. Often, however, you can manage stress on your own through some commonsense techniques. Below are six strategies that adult learners have used to help them calm down, cope, and relax. Some of their strategies might be appropriate for you.

1. Identify a Source of Comfort

A cup of tea in the afternoon, a warm bath, or a quiet walk can offer a peaceful break. Take time to read a magazine, or a good book. Play with your dog or your child. Any of these can be a source of comfort and relaxation when you are stressed.

2. Try Relaxation Techniques

Some students find that taking a class in meditation or relaxation techniques helps them. Stress management courses offered through your college, a local

hospital, or some health maintenance organizations teach such techniques. Some students find that learning yoga helps.

3. Use Exercise

Most medical practitioners suggest that exercise, as strenuous as possible, often relieves stress. A brisk walk, jogging, aerobic exercise, handball, and tennis all can relieve the tense muscles and nerves that come with feelings of stress. A half-hour of exercise can make your study or work time more productive because you will be able to concentrate better and focus on your work, free from the distractions of stress.

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4. Try Imagery

Another stress reduction technique is the use of imagery. Sit quietly in a dark room, close your eyes, and visualize a calming image: clouds, swirls of color, the sea, a field of flowers. Let the image envelop you.

5. Find an Anchor

Anchoring is learning to associate a particular emotional state with a special word or movement. While in a stressed state, recall an experience when you

felt relaxed, confident, and powerful. Think of as many details as you can, remembering how you felt at the time. Then choose a word or movement (such as tugging your ear or scratching your nose) to associate with this relaxed state—your anchor. As you visualize your relaxed and confident state, say the special word or repeat the movement that you've chosen. Once you've reinforced the anchor, it should become relatively permanent. When you next feel anxious, use your anchor to remind you of your confidence, self-esteem, and ability.

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elaxation Exercise

1. Begin by sitting quietly in a comfortable position.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Breathe in deeply through your nose and feel your stomach (not chest) expand.
4. Continue breathing easily and naturally.
5. Relax your muscles, beginning with your feet and progressing to your face.
6. Picture a calm, relaxing scene.
7. Now put yourself into that scene.
8. Picture someone you trust who believes in you, supports you, and cares about you.
9. Imagine the person is with you and offering you encouragement.

6. Connect with Your Support System

Some students discover that when they return to school, they no longer have time for conversations with good friends. Loss of

a valued support system can be a cause of stress in itself. Although you may, in fact, need to cut down on socializing in order to make time for schoolwork, most students advise that you build in time to reconnect with trusted friends.

In this chapter, you've read suggestions by many students who have faced the same feelings of time pressures and stress that you may be feeling. Learning how to manage time and minimize stress is part of the whole learning experience of college.

As you learn new academic skills, the topic of Chapter 5, you'll feel more confident and empowered as a student. In Chapters 6 through 8, you'll find useful strategies for reading a variety of college material, for conducting productive research, and for writing strong papers.