

## THE LEARNING CENTER • University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

# Procrastination

Everyone procrastinates, but that doesn't mean it's inevitable.

**You can stop procrastinating today.** But you might need some help understanding why you do it and how you can stop. Here, you can learn why procrastination happens, find some easy tips to stop procrastinating now, and arm yourself with useful anti-procrastination tools that you can use on campus or at home.

## Why we procrastinate

**Because we're wired to seek instant gratification.** Chances are good that you have Facebook, Instagram, and/or Twitter pulled up in another window on the device you're using to read these very words. And it's so tempting to keep checking it, right? There's a reason for that: research suggests that instant gratification has a stronger effect on our behavior than delayed gratification.

**Because we think we should be perfect.** Procrastination and perfectionism often go hand in hand. Perfectionists tend to procrastinate because they expect so much of themselves, and they are scared about whether they can meet those high standards. Perfectionists sometimes give a half-hearted effort in order to maintain the belief that they could have written a great paper if only they had tried their best. They are afraid of trying their best and still producing a paper that is just okay.

**Because we don't like what we need to do.** You may procrastinate on writing because you don't like to re-read what you have written; you hate writing a first draft and then being forced to evaluate it. By procrastinating, you ensure that you don't have time to read over your work, thus avoiding that uncomfortable moment.

**Because we're too busy.** When we overbook our calendars, it's easy to avoid the things we don't want to do, even if we need to do them.

## How to tame procrastination

### Take an inventory

Keeping track of when you procrastinate with a [weekly planner](#) can help you figure out when you procrastinate and can help you stop the behavior. It's easy to do: whenever you procrastinate, mark it down. Think about clues that can alert you: for example, a nagging voice in your head, a visual image of what you are avoiding or the consequences of not doing it, physical ailments (stomach tightness,

headaches, muscle tension), inability to concentrate, or inability to enjoy what you are doing.

## Create a productive environment

If you've made the decision to stop delaying on a particular project, it's critical to find a place to work where you have a chance of getting something done. Your dorm room or your bedroom may not be the place where you're most productive. Think about where you are most productively and try to find or create a space with those conditions. UNC's many libraries offer great places to work. If you're working at home, try finding a space that you devote solely to studying, like a desk or a comfy chair. Make sure to find your study space before it's time to be productive; otherwise, finding the perfect space could turn into a form of procrastination itself!

One useful way to structure your environment is to leave yourself reminders to work in places you know you'll see (like your bathroom mirror or coffee machine). Once you're in a productive space, eliminate digital distractions. Pull up the materials you need on your laptop, and turn the Wi-Fi off and put your phone on airplane mode.

## Challenge your myths

Think of a project that you are currently putting off. On one side of a piece of paper, write down all the reasons for your delay. On the other side, argue against the delay.

**Myth #1:** "I can't function in a messy environment. I can't possibly work on this project until I have cleaned my apartment."

**Challenge:** If, when faced with a project, you start piling up prerequisites for all the things you must do before you can possibly start working, consider whether you might in fact be making excuses—in other words, procrastinating.

**Myth #2:** "I do my best work under pressure."

**Challenge:** There are other ways to create pressure for yourself besides waiting until the night before the project is due before you start working on it. You can set a time limit for yourself—for example, "I will write this paragraph in half an hour"—or you can pretend that the assignment is a timed exam. If you do this a week or two before the assignment is due, you'll have a draft in plenty of time to revise and edit it.

**Myth #3:** "In order to be productive, I must have two uninterrupted hours."

**Challenge:** You can work on assignments in one hour blocks (or shorter), and many people benefit from working in shorter blocks. This will help you break the task down into smaller pieces, thereby making it seem more manageable. If you know that you can work on one part of the project for one

hour, then it won't seem so daunting, and you will be less likely to procrastinate. Some people find, however, that they do need longer blocks of time in order to really produce anything. Therefore, like all of the strategies outlined here, know yourself.

## Break it down

The day you get an assignment, break it up into the smallest possible chunks. Using the Learning Center's weekly action plan can help. When you break a project down, it never has a chance to take on gargantuan proportions in your mind. If you're working on a research paper, for example, you can say to yourself, "Right now, I'm going to write the introduction. That's all, just the introduction!" And you may be more likely to sit down and do that, than you will to sit down and "write the paper." If you're working remotely and feel overwhelmed by assignments for multiple classes, breaking your assignments down into smaller tasks can help your week feel more manageable. Focusing on studying one chapter of your chemistry textbook and writing an introduction to your research paper and building from there may feel more manageable than focusing on having a chemistry test and a research paper due in the same week.

## Ask for help

Get an anti-procrastination buddy. Tell someone about your work goal and timeline, and ask them to help you determine whether or not your plan is realistic. You can do the same for him or her. Once or twice a week, email your buddy to report on your progress, and declare your promise for the next week. If, despite your good intentions, you start procrastinating again, don't think, "All is lost!" Instead, talk to your buddy about it. They may be able to help you put your slip into perspective and get back on track.

You can also make a one-on-one appointment with one of the Learning Center's academic coaches and create an accountability structure with him or her.

## Learn how to tell time

One of the best ways to combat procrastination is to develop a more realistic understanding of time. Our views of time tend to be fairly unrealistic. "This paper is only going to take me about five hours to write," you think. "Therefore, I don't need to start on it until the night before." What you may be forgetting, however, is that our time is often filled with more activities than we realize. On the night in question, for instance, let's say you go to the gym at 4:45 PM. You work out (1 hour), take a shower and dress (30 minutes), eat dinner (45 minutes), and go to a sorority meeting (1 hour). By the time you get back to your dorm room to begin work on the paper, it is already 8:00 PM. But now you need to check your email and return a couple of phone calls. It's 8:30 PM. before you finally sit down to write the paper. If the paper does indeed take five hours to write, you will be up until 1:30 in the morning—and that doesn't include the time that you may spend watching Netflix or scrolling through Instagram. And, as it turns out, it takes about five hours to write a first draft of the essay. You have forgotten to

allow time for revision, editing, and proofreading. You get the paper done and turn it in the next morning. But you know it isn't your best work, and you are pretty tired from the late night, and so you make yourself a promise: "Next time, I'll start early!"

## **Make an unschedule**

The next time you have a deadline, try using an unschedule to outline a realistic plan for when you'll work. An unschedule is a weekly calendar of all the ways your time is already accounted for, so you include not only classes but also activities such as meals, exercise, errands, laundry, and socializing. This will give you an outline of the time that you spend doing other things besides studying.

An unschedule will reveal your blank spaces: these are the times to schedule work. By using these as a guide, you'll be able to more accurately predict how much time you can study on any given day. An unschedule might also be a good way to get started on a larger project such as a term paper or an honors thesis. You may think that you have "all semester" to get the writing done, but if you really sit down and map out how much time you have available to work on a daily and weekly basis, you will see that you need to get started sooner, rather than later.

Perhaps most importantly, an unschedule can help you see how you spend your time. You may be surprised at how much (or how little) time you spend on social media and decide to make a change. It's especially important that you build time for fun activities into your unschedule. Otherwise, you might procrastinate because you need time for relaxation.

You can also use the unschedule to record your progress towards your goal. Each time you work on a paper, for example, mark it on the unschedule. One of the most important things you can do to kick the procrastination habit is to reward yourself when you write something, even if that writing is only a little piece of the whole. Seeing your success recorded will help reinforce the productive behavior, and you will feel more motivated to write later in the day or week.

## **Set a time limit**

Okay, so maybe one of the reasons you procrastinate on working on a particular assignment is because you hate it! You would rather be at the dentist than sitting in front of your desk with this problem set staring you in the face. In that case, it may be helpful to set limits on how much time you

will spend working on it before you do something else. While the notation “Must work on Hemingway essay all weekend” may not inspire you to sit down and write, “Worked on Hemingway essay for ½ hour” just might.

A lot of students find the Pomodoro Technique a helpful way to build in breaks. Pomodoro technique is simple: All you do is set a timer for 25 minutes, work during that time, and take a 5-minute break when the timer goes off. Rinse, repeat. It’s a great way of avoiding burnout!

## Practice self-forgiveness

Research suggests that forgiving yourself for procrastinating in the past can help you procrastinate less in the future. It’s a way of acknowledging that procrastination is something you can change. Remember: The past is in the past. Let it go.

## Take a social media hiatus

There are only so many cat pictures you can look at before social media becomes counterproductive. It can be detrimental to your GPA in two ways:

1. By taking up your time: Research suggests that hours spent on Facebook are negatively correlated to GPA.
2. By taking up your attention: Yet more research suggests that texting while studying interferes with your mental bandwidth and ability to deeply learn material.

What is to be done? You can take a social media hiatus. It’s simple: You can start by swearing off social media for two hours. You’ll be amazed at how many times you automatically move to check Twitter or Instagram. See if you can gradually build your endurance: Can you stay off social media for four hours? A day? A week? If you tame social media, you’ll have loads more time to work, play, and sleep.

# How can technology help?

Need some help taming procrastination? Technology can help intervene at various stages to help you prevent procrastination:

**Enforce your social media hiatus.** Use distraction-blocking applications like [StayFocused](#), [SelfControl](#), and [Serene](#) that allow you to blacklist distracting websites on your desktop or smartphone. Many of these apps also integrate short timers that encourage you to work in short, manageable sessions.

**Set a timer.** Many smartphones and computers allow you to set a timer that will help you set a time limit for tasks. Timer apps such as [MultiTimer](#) and [Goodtime](#) include advanced features for switching between scheduled work and break periods.

**Calendars for creating an unschedule:** Using an online calendar like Google Calendar or iCal to create events that recur monthly, weekly, or daily can help you see your schedule from a bird's eye view and identify where you have time to complete a task. You can also set reminders to signal when it's time to get started on a task.

**Checklists and sticky notes for breaking down projects:** Make a checklist to break down a large project into smaller, more manageable tasks. Write out your checklist by hand, or create a quick [glist.cc](http://glist.cc) online. Then put your current task on a sticky note to create a visual reminder—or add a virtual sticky note to your [MacOS](#) or [Windows](#) desktop.

## Testimonials

Check out what other students and writers have tried!

**Staying on Track with MultiTimer:** A writing coach uses MultiTimer to stay on track and manage her time.

**What I'm Trying: Inquiry-Based Stress Reduction:** Ani shares her experience trying Inquiry-Based Stress Reduction to tame procrastination.

**How I Use the Pomodoro Technique:** A Writing Coach shares his experience using the Pomodoro Technique to work in small intervals and break tasks into manageable chunks.

**Using Trello to Stay Organized:** A Writing Coach manages procrastination by using Trello to break writing projects down into small chunks.

## Parting thoughts

As you explore why you procrastinate and experiment with strategies for working differently, don't expect overnight transformation. You developed the procrastination habit over a long period of time; you aren't likely going to break it all at once. But you can change the behavior, bit by bit. If you stop punishing yourself when you procrastinate and start rewarding yourself for your small successes, you will eventually develop new writing habits. And you will get a lot more sleep.

In addition to these tips, check out some of our other handouts and resources to help you with procrastination, such as our handouts on [motivation](#), [distractions](#), and [digital distractions](#).

## Works consulted

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