

The Planning fallacy

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Cognitive biases are the errors in thinking we are routinely susceptible to during decision making and planning. Fortunately they can be overcome by recognising them and making the necessary adjustments to your thinking.

What is the planning fallacy?

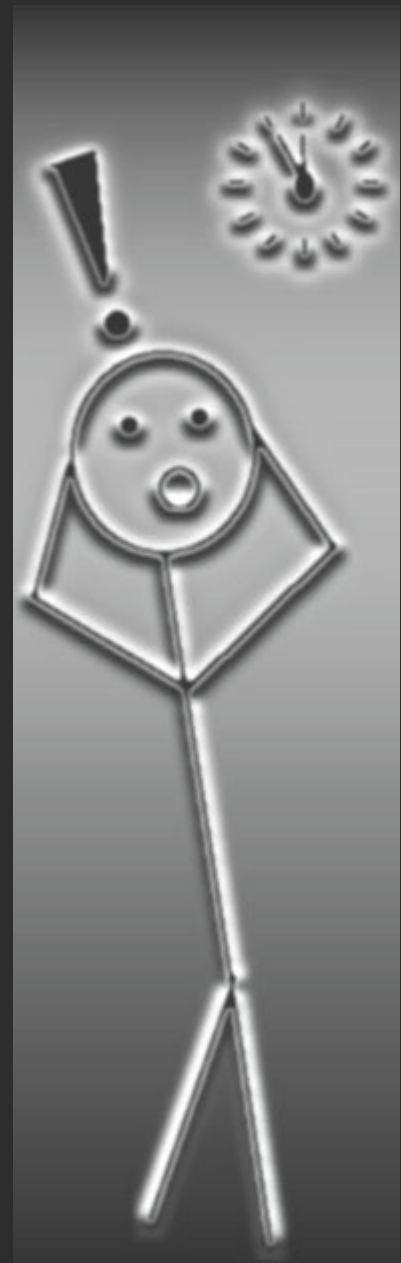
When someone is estimating how long a project will take to complete, they may do it by dividing the task into subtasks and summing the length of those subtasks. This may sound reasonable, but the more subtasks your project has, the more error is introduced into your calculation. In Godel, Escher, Bach, Douglas Hofstadter introduces Hofstadter's Law, which states "It always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter's Law." You may underestimate the length of the first subtask by fifteen minutes, the second subtask by ten minutes, the third subtask

by five minutes, the fourth subtask by twenty minutes, the fifth subtask by ten minutes. Suddenly, you've underestimated how long the project takes by an hour!

What can I do about it?

You are much better off comparing your project to similar projects you have done in the past. If you are writing a six-page essay, compare it to how long it has taken you to write one in the past, rather adding up how long you think it will take to research, to write, and to edit. This rule is most important when considering multi-stage projects, like your final portfolio or thesis project. Also, you should ask someone with experience like your professor or another student how long they think it will take. Objective observers will tend to overestimate how long projects will take others to complete, so you'll get the buffer room needed to ensure your project is done on time.

The cognitive bias that can make you turn in that critical project late.



Hofstadter's Law: "It always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter's Law."