From Idea to Publication: managing projects for academic work

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Introduction

At its most basic, project management not much more than axiety management. Every project invariably has "open loops" of unfinished tasks which the mind attempts to remind itself to do. A reliable task management *system*—which is not the same thing as an application or program—helps you focus on the work by closing the loops and reducing your anxiety about forgotten tasks.

The mind is awful at reminding you what to when you need to be reminded. Use a task management system that you trust.

A GTD Crash Course

Projects vs Tasks

A task is any single action.

A project is anything that requires two or more actions

A simple example Emailing your adviser to ask a question about the grading rubric for a TA class is a task because it is one action. Attending office hours for your adviser is a project because you have several dependencies that are involved: drafting a quick agenda of the two or three items you need. Emailing him or her the agenda in advance with any attachments they need so they can be prepared. Spending a few minutes before you arrive to review your agenda before walking to his or her office, etc., etc.

Tasks vs Contexts

Every task you create for yourself belongs to both a project and a context.[1] A *Context* is often described as the one physical thing or place that is mandatory before the task can be done. For instance, you need your laptop if you're going to write a section of your paper but you must be in the building if you're going to drop off documents to anyone in the front office. Simple enough. But you can extend this concept to non-physical things like the day and time of the week or your energy level. The reason for doing this is that you can maximize you're overall efficiency through the day.

[1] Sometimes, the project may just be a catch all for all single action tasks.

Pro-tip: Make a context or just a list for every faculty or staff member you interact with regularly. When you get two or three items, you have an agenda to email them. It let's them know you value their time.

Daily and Weekly Review

Whatever system you use to manage your projects, it will not work if you do not trust it intuitively. The instant you're not sure if you've captured all your tasks and projects, you're mind will begin to "remind" you—at which point, the anxiety of unfinished work and open loops will set in. The only way to prevent this is to review regularly. Spending a few minutes at the start and end of the work day to review will save you countless hours of time and anxiety. A longer weekly review helps you keep your eye on the medium- and long-term.[2]

[2] David Allen discusses this process in greater detail.

Backward Planning

Most graduate students think about projects as a linear move from data, to theory, to write up, to submission. This is wrong for two reasons. First, the process is literally backwards. Project planning should begin with a deadline and worked-out in reverse chronological order based on the required dependencies and their estimated durations. Second, nearly every piece of writing we create develops from a previous paper or idea. Writing and the creative process are iterative. The creative process is a necessary prerequisite to the writing process, but they are not the same thing. You need a way to keep tabs on new ideas, develop them, and recognize when they are ready to be made into a project.

Writing Projects and GTD

Basic Principles

1. Embrace iteration
2. Write early, write often
3. Organize efficiently
4. Outsource your time-management

Embrace Iteration No project goes from idea to publication in one move. Keep a notepad or journal on you at all time. Find a good database program to elaborate the ideas. Review your ideas regularly. Tinker, draft, trash, repeat. Lots of scholars keep a spreadsheet with columns for Title, Thesis, Abstract. I use a database system. Again, find what works for you, and make it a habit.

Write early, Write often Get in the habit of writing 300–500 words every day, or at a minimum several times per week. The research shows that scholars who write for short periods more often produce more work, more frequently than those who write for longer periods in blocks.[3] One reason this works is that it trains yourself to overcome writer's block and anxiety about getting started.[4]

[3] Paul J. Silva, *How to write a lot.*

[4] Steven Pressfield calls this "killing the resistance."

Organize efficiently Good ideas are only useful if you can find them later. Using a good file naming system goes a long way to keep things tidy on your hard drive. Writing notes in plain text with a file name that begins with `YYYYMMDD - title` will help you find your notes faster whether you use a program like Evernote, DevonThink, or manual searching..

Think of your notes as digital versions of index cards. cf. Umberto Eco, *How to Write a Thesis*

Outsource your time-management Using a task management system with the concepts outlined above is, I believe, the key hurdle to getting work out the door. Just remember that it isn't about the application or which brand journal you buy—but it is essential to (a) find a system that works for you, and (b) use that system until it's second nature.

Pro-Tip: Don't try do learn all this stuff at once. Try to master one habit per semester.

Applications

Currently Using

- Leuchtturm 1917 Journal and a good pen
- DevonThink
- Emacs & Sublime
- OmniFocus for Mac and iOS
- BusyCal

Previously Used

- Evernote
- Scrivener[5]
- Mellel (Word processor)
- Sente and/or Pages (the citation manager)

[5] Scriverner is strongly encouraged for those who are not comfortable with the command line

Noteable Mention

- TexPad
- Mendeley

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