From Idea to Publication: managing projects for academic work

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A GTD Crash Course

Projects vs Tasks

A task is any single action.

A project is anything that requires two or more actions.

Tasks vs Contexts

A task is the action you do.

A context is the thing, place, time of day, or energy level required before the task can be done.

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, your 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]

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.

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.

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

Writing Projects and GTD

Basic Principles

Embrace Iteration   No project goes from idea to publication in one move. Keep a notepad or journal on you at all times. 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. One reason this works is that it trains yourself to overcome writer's block and anxiety about getting started.[3]

[3] Steven Pressfield calls this "killing the resistance" in *The War of Art*

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.[4]

[4] 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.

Further Reading

If you're interested in the concepts of better task management, look at David Allen's *Getting Things Done* and Seth Godin's video "the lizard brain" `https://vimeo.com/5895898`. For writing itself, start with David J. Silva's *How to Write a Lot*, Laura Belcher's *How to write a journal article in 12 weeks*, and the classic from Umberto Eco, *How to Write a Thesis*.