

Project Management for Grad Students: a brief guide

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1 Introduction

What does writing a paper share in common with cooking and war? Answer: each has an pre-visualized end-state that requires multiple, independent dependencies, each with their own time-lines.

1.1 Open loops and anxiety

A good project management system is mostly about managing the anxiety about open loops in your mind. David Allen, GTD

1.2 Process over Apps

Over the years I've used a variety of task management applications and "systems" to greater and lesser degrees of failure and success. I'll keep my remarks platform and application agnostic, offering comments on what I use at the end.

1.3 Advanced Common sense

Most of what I will cover is best described as "advanced common sense". I hope to say nothing you've not already heard before but perhaps in a new and interesting way.

2 The process

2.1 Reverse (backward) planning.

1. Dependency driven

2. Deadline driven
3. Context driven

2.2 Projects, Tasks, Contexts

1. GTD crash course
2. A sample project

3 The Apps

3.1 Currently using

1. Emacs
2. DevonThink
3. OmniFocus
4. NvALT
5. markdown+pandoc

3.2 Previously used

1. Sublime Text
2. Scrivener
3. Pages/Sente

3.3 Shoulda, Coulda, Woulda

1. Mendeley
2. Index Cards

4 The problem

4.1 Time and attention

1. Finite Resources
2. Infinite demands

4.2 For example

1. Think about the raw numbers of a work day
 - (a) 3 hours of seminar, 1–2 hours of grading or TA class, reading ungodly amounts of literature for class, stats problem sets, etc.
 - (b) An hour for the gym, lunch and coffee breaks, commute time to/from campus.
 - (c) Spending time with Significant Other, calling home, Netflix and chill
2. Where is the the time to get things done?
 - (a) Again, we're back to managing the anxiety
 - (b) And if we've captured our stuff adequately, we'll know where to start.

4.3 Projects, is and ought

1. How it is, forwardly linear

pick a topic → find some articles → read about it → get some data → since the deadline isn't for a while, tinker with the data, maybe read some more and ... → Whollyshit it's due tomorrow write like crazy
2. A better way, reverse dependencies

Write up theory/litt review section ← Data analysis ← Write data section ← complete draft two weeks prior to deadline ← Reverse Outline ← Revise ← Proof read ← Deadline

5 A GTD Crash Course

5.1 Projects, Tasks, Contexts

1. Projects vs. Tasks
 - (a) A task is any single action
 - i. e.g., email adviser about grading for TA class
 - (b) A project is any objective that requires two or more tasks to complete
 - i. e.g., Attend office hours for adviser

- A. Figure out when his or her office hours are this semester
- B. Create agenda
- C. email agenda
- D. Review agenda and prep for discussion

2. Tasks vs Contexts

- (a) Every task should be long to a project and context
- (b) A context is the thing that must be present for you to accomplish the task
 - i. e.g., You're telephone to make a phone call
 - ii. Your laptop to write a paper
 - iii. Amazon
 - iv. Grocery store
- (c) Sometimes contexts can be things other than physical objects
 - i. Make a context for each major faculty member you interact with regularly
 - ii. Time of day or energy level (e.g., morning vs evening writers)

5.2 The Point of all this

- 1. Break down as much as you can into tasks and projects.
- 2. Review those regularly, a quick morning review and a longer weekly review
- 3. It takes time before your mind lets go of the anxiety so be patient
- 4. In fact, start small with a simple, straight forward system, on a handful of the most important things you don't want to get behind on; then start to include more things

6 Inbox Zero

6.1 GTD is about planning. What about execution?

6.2 Five actions of Inbox Zero (Merlin Mann)

- 1. Delete (or archive)
- 2. Delegate

3. Respond

4. Defer

5. Do

7 Putting it together

8 Some applications

DevonThink (database) OmniFocus (tasks) NvAlt (notes and capture)