

From Idea to Publication: managing projects for academic work

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September 28, 2016

Introduction

Close the loops

Managing projects is, at its core, fundamentally about managing the anxiety produced by the nagging question in your head “Oh, don’t forget to do [x].” As it turns out, human nature is surprisingly inefficient when it comes to remembering tasks, “to-do” lists, and priorities.

David Allen *Getting Things Done*

Apps don’t matter

You can waste a lot of hours jumping from application to application, pursuing task-management utopia. But remember that at the end of the day, what application you use does not matter. Find the ones that work for you, learn the hell of it. Grasping a few basic concepts for *process* will serve you much better. Let the tasks determine the tools, not the other way around.

Kieran Healy, *Plain Text Guide*

Backward Planning

The approach that most graduate students think about projects is progressively linear. From the moment we get an idea or decide to write a paper, the process usually looks something like the following.

data crunch → read for a theory → recrunch data → repeat until deadline

This process is *literally* backwards. Although somewhat of a caricature of the writing process, some version of this is where most of us find ourselves most of the time. Parkinson’s Law captures the phenomenon but not the reason why this happens on an individual level. Open loops cause us to constantly revise, re-read, refine because we’re unsure when the project is ‘done’. Better is to begin with the hard deadline and work in reverse-chronological order to determine all the dependencies which must be accomplished, the time estimated for each dependency, and the order they must be finished. The process looks like this:

Pro-Tip: it is always a good idea to set your deadline a week before the hard deadline.

Read ← Data Crunch ← Write ← Proof ← Revisions ← Deadline

For example, if you need a week to proof read something, then you need to be finished at least one week before you deadline. And if you write the introduction and conclusions last and those take a few days, then you need to finish the data-analysis or major portions at least a week before that. And so forth...

Although a bit of overkill for graduate students, a Gantt chart captures this concept quite well.

In the weeds

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 your 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, your mind will begin to "re-mind" 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.

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. Indeed, even your ideas will begin from previous work. So keep a journal and a pen on you at all times. Tinker, draft, trash, repeat. Review these ideas regularly and keep a file on your computer with a list of possible projects and ideas.

Write early, Write often You should be writing 500 words every day, or at least three or four 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.

Lots of people prefer to keep a spreadsheet with TITLE, THESIS, ABSTRACT that they can draw from. Over time, you'll have dozens of ideas to draw from.

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

Steven Pressfield calls this "killing the resistance."

Organize efficiently I use a database program called *DevonThink* which is best described as much more advanced version of Evernote. It has an indexing feature and built-in AI that can find related notes. 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.⁴ I've been using *OmniFocus*, which is a Mac-only product. The key feature is that it has companion apps for iOS which lets me stay on top of my tasks even when I don't have my computer at hand. There are other apps of course. If you have one, keep using it until it doesn't work for you. But you could easily do this with a notepad, calendar, and a pencil.

⁴ Although unrelated to task management apps, Seth Godin's talk on "the lizard brain" (google it) makes a similar point about product shipment for apps.

References

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