

Introduction to Time Management

Getting yourself organized

When you first start studying it is difficult simply because it has no 'shape' for you. Until you have developed some kind of system, for studying - until you can get a general feel for what needs to be done and when - you spend a lot of time dithering about, starting one thing and then another and wondering whether you are getting anywhere. In the Case Study, Michael was clearly suffering from the lack of a thought-out purpose and plan. One of his main problems was how to manage his study time.

Managing time

In fact, he had two kinds of problems with time: finding enough of it, and using it effectively.

Finding time

He had social commitments (picking up Fran, talking to Robbie on the phone), work commitments (an early start the next day), and leisure interests (watching the spy thriller). All of these things are important. Is there enough space in between for studying? Adult students always have to make very difficult choices between calls on their time. When studying comes into your life it generally means that something else has to go out. And yet we all know what 'all work and no play' does. Even students have to have some fun. So this is one of the first problems you have to face — the juggling act you have to develop in order to keep an extra ball in play in your life. Effective studying often requires quite a lot of time and in fairly good-sized chunks. So you have to become an expert at creating time. One way to set about this is to draw up a chart of your 'typical' week and see where there is room for manoeuvre.

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Etc...
Morning				
Afternoon				
Evening				

Draw yourself a chart of the kind shown above. Work out the total study time you can reasonably expect to set aside and where in the week it falls. Try to identify where clashes are likely to occur and where you may have to cut back on some other things.

Mark made up a study chart for his Computing course.

He says “ I did not stick to it every week and when the homework and assignments got more complex I needed extra sessions. But I was glad I had allocated time to complete assignments each week because I could see how others were stressing. I left Saturday free for football and weekends to go out with my girlfriend.“

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Morn	SAD	CompMeth	Soft.Dev	Maths			
	SAD	Lang & Comm	ASS		Lang & Comm		ASS
Aft.	ASS	Comp.Meth	ASS	Soft Dev	SAD		
	ASS	ASS	Comp.Meth	Soft Dev			
Eve	ASS	ASS					

Don't be alarmed if you found this activity almost impossible. It is. Life is usually extremely messy. What is more, having made a plan, it is even harder to stick to it. But sticking to it is not necessarily the point. Even if you find that you are constantly having to change your plans it is still worth making the effort, because the decisions you make in changing your plans force you to think about what you are doing and why. Planning makes you think strategically instead of just drifting.

Using time

Michael was experiencing difficulty not only with finding enough time but also with making effective use of time. He could not decide what tasks to take on in the two-hour period available to him. By flitting about rather inconclusively he ended up finishing the session early, without really having achieved very much. To avoid this you need to develop ideas about how much time you need for particular types of task and how long to stick at them when you are running into overtime. You will find you can do some tasks (such as reading a difficult passage or writing a section of an essay) only when you are reasonably fresh and have a good sized chunk of time ahead of you, while others (such as organizing your notes, or reading through a draft of an essay) you can squeeze into odd moments, or manage when you are more tired. People vary a lot in their patterns of working, so these suggestions may not be the right ones for you. The point is that, to get the best out of yourself in the time you have available, you need to stop occasionally to reflect on whether you could parcel out your study time in different ways to get better results. Don't just plod on vaguely hoping for the best. You need to manage yourself more actively than that.

Completing a task

So far I have talked as though studying came neatly bundled into clear-cut tasks. Unfortunately, as Michael found, a lot of what you have to do as a student is extremely weakly defined. Indeed, it is a crucial part of your job to create the shape and size of the tasks you have to do. As an adult student you have to define tasks for yourself.

Defining tasks

The first thing is to have an overall idea of what you are hoping to accomplish in a given week. But you also need to define smaller tasks, such as 'reading the next ten pages of the chapter', so that you can decide how much time to give to each and so that you can manage yourself, i.e.:

- get yourself started,
- keep yourself going, and
- decide when to stop and move on to another task.

When you have set yourself a defined task, it is easier to focus your attention on it and to keep yourself working your way through it, resisting some of the distractions Michael found himself prey to.

Moreover, as Sandy was finding, it is particularly important with a big task, such as writing an essay, to be able to break it down into a series of smaller tasks.

Why is it so easy to be distracted when you are studying?

It is the feeling of drifting in a sea of meaninglessness which makes you so ready to grasp at any straws of distraction you can find. When you don't really understand the text and don't really know what you are trying to do, it makes you feel restless and uneasy. Distractions offer you the chance to focus your attention on familiar and meaningful parts of your life and so escape from the uncertainties which studying often brings. The urge to avoid uncertainty is very strong. That is why it is so important to define clear-cut tasks for yourself to create a shape and a meaning for your work.

If you find that you keep stopping as you work, try setting yourself a smaller and more tightly defined task, particularly one with an active component in it. For example, if you keep drifting off as you read, get a highlighting pen and search for a key word or phrase in the first sentence of each paragraph. This will give you a more concrete task to focus on.

Typical study tasks you can define for yourself are:

- ~ read the next two sections of the text you are studying
- ~ make notes on an article you have read recently
- ~ sort out and file the notes you have made over the past couple of weeks
- ~ plan your next essay
- ~ browse in the library, looking for useful articles and books
- ~ gather together notes and ideas for your essay
- ~ write a first draft of the main section of the essay

- ~ make contact with other students
- ~ attend class
- ~ go over your study plans for the coming week.

Having given some shape to your studies by identifying a number of tasks to be done, you then need to divide the time you have available between these tasks. I doubt whether you could ever do this in a precise way and then stick exactly to your plans. Studying is too unpredictable for that. But you can set broad targets which will help you to decide when it is time to stop doing one thing and start on the next.

Time v. Task

Time management and task management are closely bound up with each other. You need to balance one against the other. If you become too obsessed with time (as Michael was), then you tend to think in terms of the 'hours put in' rather than what you have achieved. You may find that you start 'filling up' the time with relatively unimportant tasks, just to while it away until you can finish your session feeling virtuous. To avoid this, you need to set out to get a certain task, or tasks, finished (even if you don't always succeed). On the other hand, if you focus too much on the task you may let it drag on for much too long. That is why you need to switch your attention between both task management and time management to get a reasonable balance.

3.3 Practical arrangements

Setting up a place to study

Many people find it important to set up a place where they regularly sit down to do their studying. Ideally you need to be able to work undisturbed, with space to spread your books and papers out, easy access to your files, and good lighting and heating. You may not be able to arrange all of these, but it is important to get as close as you can, if you are to give yourself a reasonable chance.



Figure 1.2 A typical study 'kit'

If you cannot set up a regular study spot where you can get on without frequent distractions, you will find studying rather frustrating.

Equipment

You need to set yourself up with a good supply of pens; A4 note-pads; a good calculator; the course text book; floppy disks (especially for backing up your files); filing boxes; labels; shelf space; and a good dictionary.

Where to keep things

If you study for any length of time, you will soon begin to accumulate large amounts of printed material, handouts, your own notes, old essays, and so on. It is important to start being systematic about how you store all this material at an early stage in your studying. As one student put it, 'It is essential to develop a good piling system.' Better still, use folders, boxes and labels. In the end you will find that, as a student, it is not so much what you can remember that counts, as what you can lay your hands on when you need it.

Bookshops and libraries

As you begin your studies it is worth making investigations as to where the best bookshops and libraries in your area are and what they have available on the subject you are studying. It can seem rather off-putting to walk into a big library or book shop and try to locate the particular section you need, especially if you are not sure what it is called. But assistants can usually give you a lot of help if you take the plunge and ask them. You may be surprised at how much relevant material there is. On the other hand, you could be disappointed and find that you need to learn how to order books through the library or how to join in book-exchanging schemes with other students.

Social arrangements

Other people often don't realize just how hard you need to concentrate when you are studying; or else they simply cannot resist the delights of your conversation. Unless you can arrange to be left alone while you study, you are in for a very hard time. It is difficult enough to think with the intensity required for making sense of subjects which are new to you. If you are going to be interrupted frequently you will require the patience of a saint. In other words, make sure the people around you understand your study plans and know when to leave you alone.

Summary

As you start on your studies you need to think carefully about the following things:

- Managing your time
 - -finding time by planning out your week
 - -using time effectively by doing work of different kinds in the most suitable time slots.
- Defining tasks for yourself –then allocating time to them and monitoring your progress as you attempt to complete them
- Setting up a place to study

- Equipping yourself
- Organizing things so that you can find them
- Exploring bookshops and libraries
- Sorting out arrangements –appointments, etc so that they do not clash with your studies.

Exercises

- 1 Make up a check list and ensure that you have everything you need in your Study Kit.
- 2 Create a weekly time management chart and use it to plan your studies for the next week.
Have you seen Assignment 0 yet?

This is a good Time Management Plan from last years assignment zero.

<u>Task</u>	<u>Estimated Time</u>
A) Read hand out Intro to Modern Technology	
B) Research other areas	
C) Plan essay	half day (A, B & C)
D) Write essay	half day
E) Review essay	half day
F) Complete Pascal Chapter 1 & exercises	half day
G) Complete Pascal Chapter 2 & exercises	half day
H) Complete Pascal Chapter 3 & exercises	half day
I) Complete Pascal Chapter 4 & exercises	half day
J) write evaluation	one hour
K) Complete assignment documentation (booklet)	two hours

Task	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
A								
B								
C								
D								
E								
F								
G								
H								
I								
J								
K								
Hand in								Hand in