

Organising yourself

This study advice sheet introduces you to the process of planning your learning and organising your time.

Time spent planning your learning can greatly benefit your studies on two levels. Firstly, you are more likely to avoid last minute rushes and participate in a wider number of activities if you have developed a realistic overview of your commitments. Secondly, if you approach a piece of work in a planned way you are more likely to carry out each stage efficiently and effectively, producing higher quality pieces of work.

Key stages include the need to:

- Be aware
 - of all of your commitments
- Be realistic
 - what is involved exactly and how long will it take?
- Make plans
 - what needs to be done?
 - when will you do it?
 - how will you do it?
- Evaluate your progress
 - how are you getting on?
 - are you on schedule?
 - what can you do quickly and efficiently to get back on schedule?

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Be aware

What broad activities take up your time?

It will be invaluable to develop an overview of all of your time commitments. You may like to make a list of all of your main activities. This should include your course commitments, spare time activities, work and family commitments, and don't forget time for relaxing, shopping, eating, drinking, sleeping and so on.

Consider all of your activities that take up time. Having established such an overview you will find it easier to move on to the next stages of prioritising your workload and drawing up work plans.

Be realistic

How can these activities be broken down into tasks?

Once you have listed all of your main activities, you might find it helpful to analyse each of them task by task. What will you need to do to fulfil all of your commitments?

For example, when writing an essay you may need to consider a wide range of tasks as follows:

Task analysis: essay writing

Analysing the title

What am I being asked here?

Brainstorming

What do I already know about the subject?

Further reading

How can I fill the gaps in my knowledge?

Essay planning

How can I structure my response?

Prioritising information

What is directly relevant, partially relevant, or simply irrelevant?

Writing the first draft

How can I express my ideas in full?

Time for reflection

How do I feel about the draft?

Revising and redrafting

Do I need to explore my ideas in more detail?

Proofreading

How can the presentation be improved?

Preparing for submission

How should I present the final copy?

Evaluating feedback

Where have I done well?
Where can I improve?

Obviously, each of these can be broken down into smaller tasks requiring shorter and shorter amounts of time. Gauge for yourself how detailed you want your task analysis to be. If you produce a list of the tasks involved in each of your activities you can assess how long each of them will take and allocate time accordingly.

Making plans

Once you have developed a clear idea of your key activities and their related tasks you can begin to make plans.

A plan or timetable needs to suit your personal needs. It is pointless spending time and money on producing a plan in glorious technicolour if it doesn't suit your preferred way of working.

Many people find it useful to plan their time on a variety of levels:

- A Long Term Timetable indicating regular and predictable events in your week
- A detailed Week Plan highlighting your workload over a seven day period
- A Daily Diary, deciding first thing in the morning what is to be done that day. Such a list can be checked throughout the day, ticking off those tasks already achieved.

When making your own plans, you may find it useful to consider your regular or timetabled commitments e.g. every Tuesday you have a seminar.

Identify all such regular commitments and put them into some sort of plan. With a clear picture of these fixed points you can arrange the rest of your activities around them. A range of planning sheets are available for viewing and downloading from the Library's study skills web pages at:

<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/library/skills/planningSheets.html>

Action planning

Once you have written a task sheet, detailing all of the tasks in the order in which they will need to be done, you can develop an action plan by assessing how long each task will take and giving each task (or stage) a deadline for completion.

Action plans can cover a range of time periods from a matter of hours to weeks, months or years. They only take a few minutes to construct but will be invaluable in helping you plan your time. Your ability to

break down a key activity into tasks, and subsequently to accurately estimate the time needed to complete them, will develop with time. However, you should always be realistic; be wary of allowing too short a time which will only result in your missing deadlines, or too much time which is simply a waste of time.

Prioritising

When you are faced with many different demands on your time it is essential that you are able to prioritise your workload. There are many different factors affecting individual priorities, including:

- Personal motivation / interest
- Oncoming deadlines
- Confidence with the task / skill
- Difficulty of the task

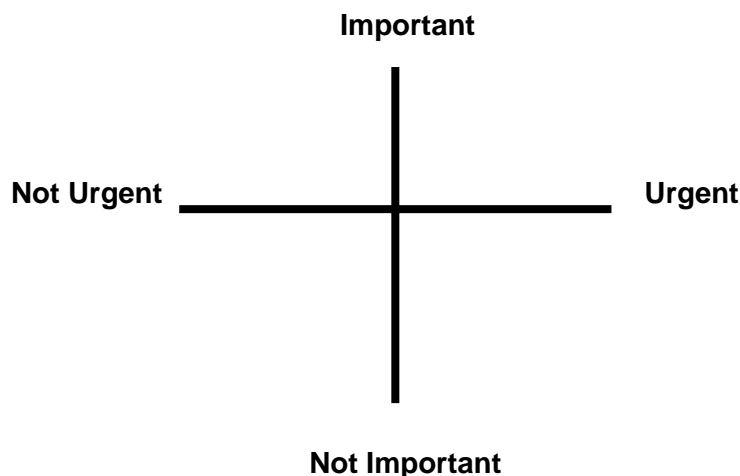
Prioritising your time involves juggling each of these, relating individual tasks to each other and putting these in the wider focus of all your commitments and responsibilities. Ask such questions as:

- What is urgent?
- What is routine?
- What can be prepared in advance?

In other words, you need to be aware that:

- some things demand immediate attention
- some things can be predicted and routinely planned for
- some things can be prepared in advance

It may help to gauge your activities and tasks on a table such as the urgency / important grid below:



Where does each task fit? Is it urgent and important? Or important but not urgent? Now apply this to your planning sheets, tackling urgent and important things first and allocating time ahead for important but non-urgent work.

Your ability to prioritise time will be helped by the process of subdividing activities into tasks and drafting action plans.

Motivation

A clear focus is important for your motivation, as is some indication of when you will be finishing.

Take real breaks. Leave your work area completely, have a stroll outside, make a cup of coffee. Avoid being drawn into something on the television or a conversation that you will find difficult to break away from.

Introduce variety so you are not always doing the same activity. Vary the type of task that you are doing.

Tackle tasks that you find uninteresting at the start of a work period. Get them out of the way and reward yourself with more inspiring work.

Evaluating your progress

Finally, you should assess how effectively you are fulfilling all of your commitments at all stages.

Once you have developed an initial overview of your activities and tasks you will need to reassess these as priorities and commitments change.

If you have produced an action plan for a project, keep this with you and tick off areas of completed work. Are you ahead of schedule? Are you behind schedule? How can you resolve any difficulties?

Time management checklist

Establish your regular commitments

What will you be doing each week?

Put this information into a weekly plan

Photocopy enough of these to last a term

What broad activities are you involved in?

Study?

Spare time?

Eating, sleeping, shopping?

What tasks are involved?

Break down the major activities into their constituent parts

Establish priorities

What is urgent?

What can be done over time?

What is routine?

Relate tasks to time

What types of tasks are they?

Do they need consecutive time?

Can they be done in small breaks?

Where do you need to be to complete the task?

Make work plans

Plan each week – be prepared, get an overview

Plan each day – be active, use checklists

Stick to these plans

Make sure they're realistic

Try not to develop a backlog

Get motivated

Be focused – always know what you want to achieve

Stay motivated

Introduce variety – don't slog away at one thing

Take real breaks but avoid distractions

Complete tasks

You'll feel better in the end

Reward productivity

You've earned it!

All study advice sheets are also available to view and download on the following website:

<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/library/skills/studySkills.html>



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