

# Procrastination

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## What is procrastination?

One of the most common problems worrying students is the tendency to put things off until the last moment - or to beyond the last moment. Of course, it is not only students who have trouble with this habit. Probably every one of us has tried to avoid some unpalatable task at some time - it is a natural human reaction. However, university students are particularly vulnerable, possibly because of the amount of work expected of them, the lack of formal structure in university and the range of tempting distractions on campus.

We all have our own preferred way of working. If letting the tension build up a bit before you get started works well for you, then there is no reason you should change. However, if you get increasingly behind with your work and end up feeling wretched about yourself and your course the problem needs addressing. Counsellors call the problem procrastination (from the Latin for "until tomorrow") and have given a lot of thought to why it happens and how to deal with it. Many people can and do break this habit, so read on if you need help.

## Signs of procrastination

Do any of the points below sound familiar to you?

### **Difficulty in making a start on a piece of work or revision**

Do you find yourself constantly putting back your starting time and never actually getting going? Are you often waiting for the "right moment" to start or for inspiration to strike you?

### **Craving diversion**

Does the need to tidy your room, do the shopping, phone home and so on become irresistible whenever you contemplate getting down to work? Are you easily distracted from your work by friends and social opportunities?

### **Ineffective working**

Do you spend time in the library but end up with little to show for it? Do you stare at a blank piece of paper rather than being able to start writing?

### **Last minute rushing**

Is all your work finally done at a breakneck speed the night before the final deadline or the exam? Do you often think you have not left yourself time to do the work justice?

### **Missed deadlines**

Do you feel you are always requesting extensions and making excuses? Are you losing marks on work because it is late? Do you find it hard to get to classes?

### **Nagging guilt**

Is your social and relaxation time spoilt by the continual feeling that you ought to be working? Do you often feel you have got a lower grade than you should have achieved?

### **Disappointment and self-reproach**

Do you feel you are letting yourself down by putting things off? Do you think of yourself as lazy and as a poor student? Do you compare yourself unfavourably with others because of your procrastinating?

If you answer yes to many of these questions, you may well have developed the habit of putting things off. Read on to learn why you do this and how to help yourself.

## **What causes us to procrastinate?**

Before looking at possible remedies, we offer some explanations about what may have led you into this habit. Understanding some of the causes of the trouble may help you avoid blaming yourself and calling yourself lazy. Instead it can help you look at constructive solutions.

### **Over-Aversion to Discomfort**

Being a student is certainly not all easy and enjoyable. Much of the work needs effort to get started and can be demoralisingly difficult to complete. In addition, the lack of structure places a considerable demand on the student. The reason that a degree is a highly respected qualification is because of the volume of hard work which goes into getting one. It is normal to find the work uncomfortable, and if you can face up to this discomfort, you can expect to get the knack of dealing with it surprisingly soon and so cease to notice it so much.

If, however you have got into the habit of putting off work whenever it feels too challenging, you never improve at doing uncomfortable things. It is as though you are never breaking through the "pain barrier" to the comfort beyond.

### **Lack of Self-Confidence**

Facing up to a complex essay or to a pile of demanding revision is never easy. It is made more difficult if you see the natural problems that arise as a sign that you are not a very good student rather than just as a sign that the work is hard. If you tend to blame yourself when problems arise, you then may not feel able to ask for help and to overcome the difficulties. This makes the problems worse. Perfectly able students can convince themselves that they are "imposters" who do not deserve to be at university at all when in fact they are capable of a high level of achievement.

## **Getting Overwhelmed**

If we sit down to write an essay and find there is a lot to research, it is natural to feel a bit swamped. There are practical ways of solving this. If, however you tend to lose direction, maybe reading books haphazardly without having a clear idea of how they can help you, you may get more and more overwhelmed until you put off starting the work altogether. Similarly, if you have got all your work in a muddle, you may not know how to start getting it back in order.

## **Under-Developed Study Skills**

Study-skills are the tools a student uses - the ability to scan books and articles fast; to summarise succinctly; to evaluate arguments quickly. If your skills are rusty or have not been sharpened, you will be like a carpenter working with blunt tools - everything will be much harder work. This problem may be made worse if English is not your first language. If you don't recognise this as a simple study skills problem and take steps to remedy it, you may become demoralised and unable to face working.

## **Unrealistic Expectations**

Some people decide they should never get less than full marks and that any grade below a first is a mark of personal failure. Unfortunately, most of us are not capable of such sustained excellent performance and will soon grind to a halt if we put this pressure upon ourselves. Unrealistic ideals can lead us to shy away from producing work that reflects our true ability. By leaving everything to the last moment we can keep alive the hope that we really could get a first in everything if we just got started.

## **Resentment**

Possibly you are not impressed by Loughborough in general. Maybe some aspect of your course has proved to be a disappointment. Perhaps the course you are on was not your first choice and you resent that you could not do what you really wanted.

You might have felt pushed into going to University against your will by parents or teachers. In situations where we feel wronged or let down or coerced but we cannot clearly see who is to blame, it is natural for us to express our resentment by not doing the work which is asked of us. It is a sophisticated form of sulking! Talking this through with someone may help.

## **Habituation and Lifestyle**

If you have become totally used to putting things off and to getting extensions, it can be immensely difficult to take the first step towards breaking the habit. The situation can be made worse if you have got in the habit of sleeping in very late, or of using drink and soft drugs to distract you.

## **Depression**

Inability to concentrate and lack of motivation can be a symptom of depression. If you have other symptoms, like sleeping problems, lack of energy and appetite, weepiness etc. you may wish to see our [PDF on Depression](#).

## Breaking the habit of procrastination

Visualise what you could achieve. Imagine having all your work done before the deadlines; imagine doing six hours of work a day then going out without a guilty conscience; imagine getting good (but not perfect!) grades without having to panic and sit up all night. Does it seem like an improvement you would welcome? Try and work out what particular thing stops you working; then try any of the following which seem appropriate.

### **Do something ... anything ... now**

Do not wait for the moment to be right before you start work. Use an odd half-an-hour waiting for the bars to open to read a book and make some notes. Start an essay in the middle if this comes easier than starting with the introduction. The quicker you find a way to get going on things the quicker you will finish them. Learning to get started without ceremony is one of the main skills of time management.

### **Don't stop because something is difficult**

If you come up against an obstacle, look for a way round it. For example, if you cannot seem to get the structure of an essay right, make a rough outline and show it to the lecturer or check with a friend. It is important not to just put everything on hold when you meet a problem since the problem will then never be solved.

### **Make a list and a timetable**

List what you have to do and estimate how long it will take and plan work on a Semester Plan and weekly & daily planners. Mark the deadlines and fit everything in. It might be a painful process if you have a lot to do, but it will soon give you a sense of direction. Don't beat yourself up if you don't stick to it 100% - or even 50%. It takes time to learn to plan. Blank timetables with hints on time planning are available from the [Library](#).

### **Arrange your work in an achievable way**

Only the exceptional person can regularly do more than forty hours of good quality work on one subject in a week. Similarly, it is hard to do more than one and a half hours at one thing without a break. Give yourself generous time off in your timetable. This can be a reward if you do well and can be used to complete work if a totally unexpected event has thrown you off course.

### **Don't aim for the impossible**

Work out realistically what standard you can achieve and start working towards that. It might be disappointing to decide you might only get a lower second, but a lower second in your hand is probably distinctly better than the first that exists only in your dreams. Once you have got started on the work you can always revise your estimate of your capability upwards if you find you have untapped potential.

### **Consider your lifestyle**

It is difficult to work in an organised way if you tend to sleep in an unplanned way and so cannot predict when your day will start. Staying up late then sleeping late becomes a difficult cycle to break. The best way is to plan to get up early, irrespective of when you went to bed. If necessary, shower, lay your clothes out and have everything ready for the morning before you go to bed so you can get going in the morning with a minimum of hassle. Try not to sleep during the day even if you feel tired so that you can get your normal daily cycle back. If alcohol or drug use is slowing you down, see if you can gain more control.

## **Aim to get more organised**

Research shows that the less worrying distractions there are, the better we work. Therefore, aim for a clear desk, sorted notes, clear priorities and so on. The more you can focus your mind, the better you will perform. However, do not substitute tidying up your room and sorting out your notes for doing some actual work or you will never get started. Keep tidying and listing as a relaxing task to be done at the end of a day's work.

## **Take action on anything you really cannot stand**

If you really don't like the University, your course or some units, think about how you can make the changes you need. Better to act now and find something you like rather than drift into the future not working and then fail to pass your degree. However, if after consideration you decide you want to stick it out and work, go back to the top of this list and begin to get the work done.

## **Find help if needed**

Academic staff can usually offer a lot of support and advice if you are confused about a piece of work. The [Library](#) runs Study Skills and can give leaflets and advice on all aspects of planning academic work and study skills. The [Academic Language Support Service](#) will support International students in improving study skills. Fellow students and those in the year above you can be a great help. University counsellors will help you talk through your problems and work with you towards finding a solution.

The [Counselling Team](#) sometimes runs short workshops on Procrastination. There is no great shame in finding studying difficult so try not to be too proud to ask for assistance.

## **Useful information**

### **Websites:**

[Centre for Clinical Interventions](#) – Procrastination self-help resource.

[Procrastination: A Scientific Guide on How to Stop Procrastinating.](#)

### **Apps:**

[Forest](#)

An app to help you be present, stay focused and get motivated.

### **Videos:**

[Ted Talk - Tim Urban, Inside the mind of a master procrastinator.](#)

### **Books:**

**Isn't it About Time? How to stop putting things off and get on with your life**

*Andrea Perry - 2002 Worth Publishing*

### **Beating the Comfort Trap**

*Windy Dryden and Jack Gordon*

A good motivating book for those of us who tend to put uncomfortable tasks off or run for the bar at the first sight of a problem - i.e. most of us!

## **Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway**

*Susan Jeffers*

The title says it all

## **The Student Writing Guide**

*Gordon Taylor*

A comprehensive guide to writing essays for arts and social science students Visit the [Library webpages](#) for a range of study help leaflets and workshops.

## **Support at Loughborough University:**

**Study Support:** 01509 228342

The Study Support Services offers a unique programme of [Mindfulness for Study](#) – from procrastination to action. The programme teaches basic mindfulness techniques and explores with students how they can be used for successful study strategies.

**Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity team:** 01509 228338

[studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk)

To book an appointment with any of our services within Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity (including the Counselling Team, Mental Health Support Team and the Wellbeing Advisers), please complete [the referral form](#).