

Dealing with Procrastination

This resource lists strategies for you to try to cope with procrastination. Read through the ideas to try the one that seems like the best next step for you, and then, most importantly, try it.

The Balance-Sheet Method

One strategy for getting work done on a task is to analyze, in writing, the positives and negatives of doing this task.

Make a chart with two columns. You can title the two columns in a way that makes sense to you: positives and negatives, obstacles and benefits, excuses and rewards. On the left side of a sheet of paper, make a list of the negatives. This could be all the reasons you are procrastinating on a particular task or the reasons you can think of as to why you haven't started. On the right side, list the positives, for example, all the benefits that you will experience if you go ahead and get the job done.

Seeing these positives and negatives in writing is a visual way to help you get realistic about the work that needs to get done.

Piece-by-Piece or the “Salami Technique”

A salami sausage, before it is sliced, is huge and impossible to eat. But when thin slices are carved off of it, the large sausage becomes manageable, something you can “get your teeth into.”

When you realize that you are procrastinating on a major task, slice it up into as many small, manageable “instant tasks” as possible. Make each task something you can accomplish in 15 minutes or less. If a long reading assignment intimidates you, break it into two- or three-page sections, make a list of each section, then cross off each section on the list as you complete it.

If the task happens to be a major one, the number of “slices” and length of the list will increase. The key is to make each incremental task so simple and quick that, by itself, the work doesn't amount to much. If possible, make it something that can be finished in several minutes. Whenever you have a few minutes to spare, start one of your “instant” tasks. The saying “Divide and Conquer” applies to large, daunting tasks just as it does to winning a war.

Systematic Development of New Habits

The third (and most fundamental) approach helps us recognize that the problem isn't the difficulty of the work, but rather the result of developing a habit over many years of procrastinating with unpleasant tasks. Procrastination is seldom related to just a single item; it is usually an ingrained behavior and thought pattern. If we can change our habits of putting unpleasant work off, we can make the previous two methods unnecessary:

Habitual Procrastinators

“This task must be done, but it is unpleasant, and I resent being forced to do something I don't like, so I'll do something that I feel better about doing.”

Managing Procrastination

“This task is unpleasant, but it must be done, so I'll do it now so I can forget about it and then do something I enjoy more after the unpleasant work is finished.”

This ability to delay gratification with the self-promise to reward oneself after work is done is a habit that needs to be developed on a regular basis. Developing the habit of delaying gratification takes intentional practice to make it a thought pattern for approaching unpleasant tasks.

Often, the tasks that you are avoiding aren't the most important priorities on your To-Do list. They are often small matters, such as an apology you've been putting off, or an overdue project you know you should start. Whatever it is, get it done or taken care of before you start other usual routines that you do without thinking. Or, set a definite time in the day that you set aside as an appointment with yourself to deal with it.

Procrastination can also be due to other factors: anxiety about a task or fear of failure, for example. If the strategies above aren't working for you, consider exploring your procrastination with someone who is professionally trained to help you gain deeper understanding as to why you may be procrastinating.

Tried and True Tips from Tutors

"Get off the computer! My computer gives me access to limitless distractions. Furthermore, because it's so easy to revise what I have written on the computer, I constantly get stuck trying to create the perfect wording when I should actually be moving on to more important things. I've done some of my best work by printing off hard copies of articles and retreating to some place away from my computer and phone, and using a notebook and pen to take notes as I read or create an outline or plans for writing."

"To get work done and to avoid distractions, I like to come up with short-term goals for different sections of the paper and then reward myself once the goals are achieved. For example, if I set a goal to write one page per day, and then actually do that, I allow myself time to go shopping after the paper's done as a reward for getting the work done."

"I find that easing into an assignment (by taking notes or watching a documentary, etc.) helps get me more interested in the subject matter, and more likely to actually start the hard work. If it's a matter of writer's block, I just start writing, even if the quality is really low, because it gets my brain working and it can be edited later."

"I schedule papers well ahead of time, and even start a small part of an assignment as soon as I get it. When I receive paper assignment instructions for a major paper near the beginning of a term, I start by writing a rough thesis and some notes, and then I don't spend a lot of time on it until closer to the due date. Several weeks before it's due, I start looking more seriously at the assignment, and start reworking the notes I started with. This makes writing the paper much easier, as I have it already started. I also give myself false deadlines, so that I make sure I am done in time, with time to revise."

"I don't try to get big assignments done in one try. I usually take a few days for research/brainstorming and another few days to write the actual paper, taking on only one section at a time. I schedule my work on the various sections to help me get it done. I keep a planner to set false deadlines, and I track other tasks on my phone. I set alarms for important tasks or appointments well in advance so I know to make time for them. Also, I write tasks in a list and prioritize them by assigning numbers from the highest urgency to the lowest."

"I have a perfectionist problem when it comes to writing papers, although I've largely remedied it by telling myself to start by writing a bad paper. It takes the pressure off knowing that the first draft doesn't have to be perfect, knowing that I'm just writing something that doesn't need to be good. Once I have something down on paper, it's a lot easier to edit/revise a very rough and low-quality draft into something good than it is to write a perfect paper from scratch. I've found new ideas to start by researching prewriting techniques."

"Exercise or some kind of physical activity is my way of beating procrastination. You'd think this would simply be more procrastinating, but I find that the best way to disengage myself from a procrastination funk is to step away from whatever is distracting me, spend half an hour doing something physically active, and then return to the assignment refreshed. Also, I devote clear time blocks each week to specific course work: e.g. studying, completing work for course A, completing work for course B, etc. I make sure to be productive during those times so that I can later afford to spend my leisure time doing what I want to do."

"I turn off my Wi-Fi on my computer. Of course, this is only useful when I have all of my research done and at hand, but it makes it a lot harder to wander onto Facebook when the internet is off."