

Managing your time can be challenging: you might have several assignments due in at a similar time, lectures to go to, family responsibilities, part-time work commitments . . . The list can feel endless at times. How do you manage your time so that you stand the best possible chance of finding academic success? First, it is important to appreciate the purpose of doing so:

The goal of effective time management is to prioritise academic study whilst also maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

We all lead busy lives, but if you are going to be successful at university you will need to prioritise work relating to your course. This does not mean neglecting other aspects of your life. The issue of time management is directly related to your health and wellbeing. If you can strike a balance between study and 'life' through better time management, it will help to alleviate stress and promote a more positive and confident approach to work. In this guide, we will consider some of the most important features of an effective time management strategy.

Time management mistakes

Some students pretend that time management is less of an issue than it actually is. You might have heard friends repeat one or more of the following mistakes:

Not using a 'to do' list

'To do' lists are very important because they allow you to set clear goals and objectives and then measure your progress against each one. 'To do' lists are very easy to create on a mobile device (or in a small notebook). Why not try Microsoft OneNote?

Not prioritising

Keeping a 'to do' list allows you to prioritise your tasks. Which one needs to be done first? Which can be done quickly? In what order do I need to complete these tasks? Employers often ask you about your ability to prioritise work commitments; it's a good idea to get used to doing it while studying.

Getting distracted or procrastinating

Most of us are easily distracted and some of us are too keen to put off tasks until the last

minute. Addressing these issues requires self-discipline. If you know you are easily distracted, turn off your phone, the television or whatever it is that stops you from working. If you're tempted to put off a task, push yourself to complete it well before it is needed. This will give you a sense of achievement that will help to create that positive attitude we mentioned earlier.

Less effective use of a timetable

It is important to create a timetable to help organise your time. However, it is vital that your time allocation is realistic. It is better to underestimate the amount of time available and then make constructive use of the extra time than put yourself under pressure by placing unrealistic demands on your time.

Not taking regular breaks

It is more or less impossible to work effectively for eight hours straight. Some students – in an effort to be as productive and hard-working as possible – make the mistake of being unrealistic in their allocation of time to certain tasks. Build in regular breaks into your work timetable. You will be far more productive if you are resting your mind for half an hour every two or three hours than if you are sitting in front of the computer for eight or more hours continuously. It is also unhealthy to do that; it may lead to eye strain or headaches, which will be unpleasant and difficult to recover from quickly.

Effective time management strategy

There are several important elements in an effective time management strategy:

1. Organisation

If you are going to make the most of your time, you need to be organised. Are you going to keep a diary? What commitments do you have other than those relating to your course? How many hours – realistically – do you have to study outside of lectures and tutorials? When do you work most efficiently? What environment do you find most comfortable to work in? This stage is important in getting the basics right: knowing what works best for you in terms of being productive and what obstacles might stand in the way of prioritising academic study.

Managing your time

2. Keeping a 'to do' list

Before you can begin planning your time, you need to have a good understanding of what tasks are facing you. Make a list – perhaps start with a weekly one – of the tasks you need to complete. Try to be specific: avoid statements like 'write essay'; instead, put 'find sources on [X]' or 'plan introduction'. The advantage of being specific is that completing each task will give you a sense of achievement. As suggested above, you can do this electronically or in a notebook.

3. 'Chunking'

While creating a 'to do' list, it is important to break down tasks into manageable pieces. Here, we've called them 'chunks'. Writing an assignment, for example, can be broken down into stages: research, planning, writing a first draft. Similarly, each one of these stages can be broken down into smaller tasks. For example, research can be divided up by topic, or even aspects of a topic. 'Chunking' is very important in allowing you to check your progress and build that sense of accomplishment mentioned above.

4. Prioritise tasks

As you create a 'to do' list, you can organise the tasks according to their urgency or importance. Usually, ordering the tasks according to when they need to be completed by is the logical approach to take. With assignments, for example, you might like to work on them in the order presented by their submission dates.

Some students find it helpful to prioritise tasks by plotting them on an 'urgency / importance' matrix, like this one:¹

Urgency	Urgent / not important	Urgent / important
	Not urgent / not important	Not urgent / important
	Low	High
	Importance	

Take each task on your 'to do' list and consider how urgent it is, followed by its

importance. Urgency is measured on the vertical axis; importance on the horizontal one. A task that is both urgent and important (and therefore a priority) would be placed in the box in the top right. Using such a tool allows you to visualise your commitments; it will also encourage you to consider the *relative* urgency or importance of each task (i.e. whether one task is more significant than another).

Creating a timetable

Implementing an effective time management strategy depends on creating a useful timetable. We have included a sample timetable you might like to use as an appendix to this guide, but we would encourage you to come up with something that works *for you*. We all have different lifestyles and commitments, so you might have to adapt this sample timetable to meet your own needs.

The sample timetable provided here covers the working week – Monday to Friday – and divides up each day into individual hours. This allows you to plot lectures, tutorials and meetings on the timetable and in doing so identify spare hours for academic study.

Why not draw up your own timetable using the 'table' feature on Microsoft Word? This will allow you to create a version of it shaped around your own studies and commitments.

Tips

Some key points to help you manage your time more effectively:

- i. Adopt an organised approach to your studies.
- ii. Break down tasks into 'chunks' and then create a 'to do' list.
- iii. Prioritise the tasks on your 'to do' list.
- iv. Create a timetable that works for you.
- v. Adopt a flexible approach to time management; be ready to add to your 'to do' list or amend your priorities in light of a change in your circumstances.

For more information on studying and academic practice, visit:

<http://study.cardiffmet.ac.uk/Pages/home.aspx>.

¹ Adapted from <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/managing-strategic-activity/prioritisation> (Accessed 27 November 2018).

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Appendix – Sample timetable

	9:00 – 10:00	10:00 – 11:00	11:00 – 12:00	12:00 – 13:00	13:00 – 14:00	14:00 – 15:00	15:00 – 16:00	16:00 – 17:00	Notes*
Mon									
Tues									
Weds									
Thurs									
Fri									

[*Notes – this is for any comments you might like to record on the tasks undertaken on that day.]