Learning Skills Services

Time Management

Workbook

This workbook is intended to provide guidance about time management and includes a short activity to help you apply what is discussed here. If you have any questions, please email adrienne.sauder@kings.uwo.ca.

Time Management Fundamentals

Time management is one of the greatest skills you can develop. Being able to manage your time effectively can mean being successful in your career, getting on the Dean's Honour List this term, or reaching important life goals like running a marathon or writing a book.

There are many approaches and strategies for effective time management. Different time management issues may require different strategies. For some the issue is becoming more efficient so you are wasting less time. For others, the issue is setting priorities more clearly, so you aren't overwhelmed with too many demands on your time. For others it's finding the motivation to start tasks that scare or overwhelm them. University students have special time management issues because of the multiple demands on their time from course work combined with the intense social demands of being in university with the frequent need to include employment.

There are some age-old, tried and true pieces of advice, like keeping your space organized (this includes desk space, backpack space, binder space, and even computer space) or setting aside time to plan (somehow that organization and scheduling doesn't just miraculously happen). Taking time to plan your day or your week is important, as it helps you identify what needs to be done and what priority each task has. It is also important because the demands on your time at university shifts from week to week. While things like class times don't change, meetings, study groups, appointments, and workload certainly does fluctuate. This leads right into the idea that weekly planning is necessary, along with long term planning. Long term planning could mean thinking about what needs to be done in the entire semester, or it could go beyond that to thinking about what you need to do to complete your degree. All levels of planning are useful.

To effectively create a schedule for school, a few key ideas need to be considered:

- The "work day" principle is the idea that school can and should be treated like a job. Your full-time job. The rule of thumb is that for every hour you spend in class, you should spend 2-3 hours outside of class studying, and by studying I mean doing the readings, reviewing notes, and completing smaller assignments. If you have a full course load and you did the minimum, then that would be 15 hours of class and 30 hours of studying per week ... 45 hours or a very full-time job. University life is fairly flexible, so some weeks you might need to do more or less, but you should aim for roughly that number. Now, if you fit those necessary hours into something resembling a Monday-Friday, 9-5 "job", then you'd have busy days, but it would be pretty easy to keep up with all of your work AND you'd still have evenings and weekends, when necessary, to spend on major assignments and exams. Just think ... you'd HAVE time to study, instead of trying to FIND time to study.
- Not everyone is a morning person and not everyone is a night owl. It's not better to be one or the other, but it is important to know which one you are, and create a schedule based on your preferences. It makes no sense to ask a night owl to be up and doing work at 7am – it would never happen – and it makes no sense to ask a morning person to work until 1am. Neither situation will create a happy and efficient student. Build a schedule that works for you. The one thing you need to remember is that no matter what time you start your day, those same number of hours of studying need to be accomplished.

- Building a schedule that you will actually use and follow means that it has to be realistic (no starting studying at 5am) and it has to be balanced. If it looks like nothing but studying 24/7, you'll never follow it. Ensure that you schedule time for yourself ... whether that's watching Netflix, hanging out with friends, going to the gym, or having an afternoon nap.

Day-to-day planning or weekly planning encourages you to be aware of what needs to be done that week, and what can reasonably be accomplished on any given day. It enables us to spread our time to all areas ... to all courses ... as is needed. Long range planning enables you to be aware of big events and important deadlines and can also be used to identify when larger projects need to be started.

Have you ever focused all your energy on one big project, an essay for example, and pushed everything else, in all your courses, to the side? How did that work for you? When you came up for air after finishing the essay, did you find yourself up to your elbows in work (like readings – they're always the first to go) that needed to be caught up on? While planning and scheduling isn't a perfect means of avoiding such situations, good planning can reduce the need for, and the stress of, feeling behind and having to catch up. It's a balancing act, and schedules are a tool to help you maintain the equilibrium.

There are 5 main things that need to be included in any useful, realistic schedule. Some things on this list sound like a no-brainer, but it is often eating, sleeping, the gym, etc – all of those necessary activities that give balance to your life – that get dropped first when you are in a time crunch and trying to meet a deadline.

Let's take a closer look at building a schedule that works for you.

1. To start, you need to add in all those things where you have no choice in the timing of them – classes and work being the main items in this category. Other such activities might be church, intramural sports games, etc., anything that can't be rescheduled. I'd also include in here any appointments that you have scheduled (remember, you should be remaking your schedule every week because of all these little changes). Doctor's appointments, professor's office hours, etc. all fall into this category.

2. Then add in items that have more flexible schedules – like the gym and certain social activities – these are often your "balancing" activities. Those times and activities where you can recharge.

3. Schedule eating and sleeping. This is where most people say, "duh of course I'll eat and sleep." However, it's important to remember that these activities are both essential and time consuming. Add to this laundry and dishes and vacuuming, etc. and it can eat up large portions of your day or week. These types of activities (especially meals) also represent breaks from working/studying. These breaks are important and shouldn't be skipped. (The hard part is going back to work again!)

4. Schedule study times. Most people don't focus well after about 2 hours or so of concentrated effort aka studying. Think of these blocks of time in 1.5-2 hour chunks with a break (anywhere from 10-30 minutes) in between. For example, let's say you have a 3 hour break between classes on Monday. You could schedule a 3 hour study session, but in actuality, it would be more efficient and effective if you worked for an hour and a half, took a break, worked for another hour, then took another quick break before heading to your next class. (This is where your task list that you will create in the next section will come in handy.) Ask yourself, which tasks do I need to do first, and what can be accomplished in the time chunk I have right now? If you only have an hour, maybe finishing 2 smaller tasks makes more sense. Taking advantage of these smaller chunks of time during the day is how you stay on top of your work. You'd be surprised how much you can accomplish if you do this every day instead of thinking "oh I don't have time to do anything" and

you let that hour between classes slip away. This is the secret to having time for those major assignments ... when you want bigger chunks of time for writing or researching. Again, this enables you to HAVE time for major assignments and exams instead of trying to FIND it. It's also important to note that switching tasks ... especially switching between courses, can be a really effective way to re-motivate yourself to do work. No one really wants to spend 2 hours on one thing, take a break and then go back to the same thing ... do something different. Maybe you could read for an hour and a half, take a break, then do some research for a paper in another class. Find ways to keep yourself motivated.

There is one thing I would like to point out about scheduling study times ... don't designate which course to study at which times. I encourage you to leave it open for several reasons. a) If you don't have any work to do for an SJPS course and you have an SJPS scheduled study time, you'll most likely think ... Sweet! Free time!! However, it's likely that you have a heavier load in another course that week, and that time should be directed at those tasks. b) It also helps you prioritize tasks and concentrate on the tasks that have closer deadlines.

5. Add in flex time. Flex time is that time that is available for additional schoolwork but is only used when necessary ... like when you have a major paper due or a mid-term coming up.

If you look at a schedule built this way, it looks busy, but it also looks balanced ... and there are even some unscheduled times in there. A schedule doesn't mean you have to pack in something every hour of every day, it means that you've allotted time for the important tasks, activities, and commitments in your life.

Take this opportunity to build your own schedule for the first week of classes. Use Worksheet 1 at the end of this workbook.

We've discussed what a useful schedule looks like, but it's necessary to examine why they are so important.

Awareness of how much time you have available to you and how much time tasks will take helps you set reasonable expectations of what you can do. How many times have you said ... "I'll read 4 chapters and write 3 one-page reflections, and attend 6 hours of class in a day so I can be all caught up" and somehow almost none of it happens? It's unreasonable to expect you can cram 18 hours of school work, 4 hours at a part-time job, a social life, and sleep into a 24 hour day, and yet students set themselves up regularly with these expectations to "catch up" using super human focus. A schedule reduces the need to do this and enables students to better match task to timeframe.

Sometimes the crush of deadlines and the volume of work in university can be overwhelming. Students often say, "I don't even know where to start." Again, a schedule (especially with a realistic, well-chunked task list – more on this later) can make the workload more manageable.

Don't think that a schedule is inflexible. It's not written in stone. Sometimes fun opportunities present themselves on the spur of the moment, and they are worth taking advantage of. What a schedule does is allow you to be spontaneous, because you can fit those missed study hours elsewhere (think about using your flex time). A schedule is a tool to remind you of what needs to be done. If you are on top of your school work, then reshuffling when you do certain activities won't create additional stress.

Schedules also help you recognize when you are wasting time ... those time-traps, like Tiktok, email, or Instagram, when "just 5 minutes turns into an hour or more." Schedules can help you say no to distractions.

Creating a schedule helps you realize if you can add more to your plate. Do you have time to add another club or sport to your commitments? Looking at your schedule will help you make better decisions about saying yes or no and about how you spend your time.

Lastly, schedules can help you start new habits. A new habit or routine takes about 3 weeks in order to make it stick. If you decide to implement a schedule, don't expect it to be easy for the first few days or that if it doesn't go perfectly the first week that you have to abandon schedules altogether. This is another reason to make a new schedule each week because you learn from the last one what works and doesn't work for you. Adjust your schedule so it fits you better.

Finally, it's essential that you realize that following a schedule is hard, especially at first. It truly is a skill, and you can get better at it only through practice. Don't make a schedule that sounds totally unrealistic … make it followable so that you can feel productive, successful, and accomplished. Use it as a motivator, not as punishment.

On a final note, schedules only help if you do appropriate activities that facilitate your learning and help you progress in your courses. Use that time during the day to prepare for lectures (even just skimming the headings in the chapter before class can be helpful) and review notes. For at least some of the content in your classes, repetition is one way to facilitate retention. The more you hear it, see it, read it, and write it, the more likely you are to remember it. To get the most out of your classes, you do need to do more with the information than just remember it, but that is a good place to start.

A great way to increase the time you spend studying without cutting into your leisure time is to utilize other "wasted" time … like the commute to school or the walk to the grocery store. One way to do this is to record yourself reading through your notes and listening to them while you commute. No one really has time to re-listen to a 3-hour lecture, but the notes from a 3-hour lecture likely only take about 10-15 minutes to listen to. Listen to one set of notes on your commute to school (preferably on the way to attending the next lecture in that course) and this helps prime your brain, which means that you're already thinking about the topic before you head into class, and you'll find it easier to make connections between what you learned previously and what is being taught in that day's lecture. Speaking and listening to information, rather than just reading it, provides multiple modalities for your brain to process and retain that information with. You'll find you remember things much better and more easily this way.

Organization and To-do Lists

One of the most important elements of time management is organization. To-do lists are an essential part of staying organized and on top of the readings and assignments for your courses. While almost everyone keeps a to-do list of some type, there are some ways of creating more effective, efficient, and motivating lists.

In order for a to-do list to be the most useful, it needs to be specific, timely, and actionable. What I mean by this, is that to-do lists have to contain sufficient detail that you don't have to scratch your head to figure out what you need to do, the items need to be accomplishable in reasonable amounts of time (No one writes "climb Mt Everest" on their daily to-do list because it's not accomplishable in one sitting, or even in one week.), and it needs to contain a verb … an action … describe what exactly needs to happen in order cross it off the list. Don't simply write "ch 7 pages 101-167". Write down whether you just need to read it, take notes on it, or lead a discussion about it. It'll help you remember the type and size of the task.

When it comes to writing effective to-do lists, the crucial part of the process is breaking down the task you need to do. Sometimes it's not necessary; if you need to copy a set of notes from someone, for

example. But for a lot of tasks, following a process to break them down can make the task seem do-able, instead of overwhelming.

Long Range Planning

Using long range planning is the best way in which to deal with the realities of the competing deadlines and large complex tasks that are a reality of student life in university. Developing this time management skill will reduce your stress, increase your learning, and improve the quality of your work.

Looking at the BIG picture of what you must accomplish this term means taking time to consider all of the school related and non-school related commitments for the whole semester. This is the first step in long range planning.

Use a 4-month calendar and record all the important dates. This isn't something you need to carry with you all the time, but it should be easily visible near your desk or some other place you will see it frequently. All of the important dates should be noted: Start with each course syllabus to get the information you need about exams, tests, and the due dates for essays and presentations. Colour coding is a handy way to differentiate between courses and makes it easier to read the calendar quickly.

If there are commitments in your personal life which will be time consuming – for example if you are moving or attending a wedding, it is important to record these things too.

You will notice that there are some weeks that are lighter and some weeks when it would not be possible to do everything in the same week. Sometimes you will have two or more things due the same day.

This helps you see how your workload ebbs and flows across the term. You will often find that due dates in different courses tend to fall at similar times. Being able to see the term at a glance helps you recognize where stress points might be for you. For example, if you know you usually work on Thursday nights and Fridays, you have a wedding to attend that weekend, and two essays due on the Monday, then you really need to start those papers much earlier than Wednesday afternoon. You look at the week prior and see it's a light week for due dates, and it becomes apparent that writing an essay a week early would make things much easier, and you'll likely enjoy the wedding even more if you don't have to worry about those assignments. Wouldn't it be nice to know you have several days to write a paper instead of just a few hours?

Your goal is to distribute the work more evenly across the term: Have plans ready for the lighter weeks for tasks you will accomplish in advance of the heavier weeks. When the heavier weeks come, you will have much less stress if one or two of the essays that are due are already written, leaving you free to focus on studying for a test. It is never too early to be starting the work that will help you have more time and focus in the later parts of the term.

If you wanted to you could add in start dates for big assignments onto this calendar as well.

Very large tasks tend to languish on "to-do" lists. A task like "Write a 20-page essay on themes of love in Twelfth Night" will not get crossed off the list at the end of the day. However, a task like "make a list of love relationships in Twelfth Night" or "Make a list of articles I might reference in my essay" or "Create an outline for essay" can get crossed off in a day. It is the accumulation of these smaller tasks that leads to the completion of the whole. It's important to remember that most tasks involve more steps and time than we think they will.

Let's talk about a few things that should be kept in mind as you do this long range planning.

The "pretend deadline" is a favourite trick of expert time managers. For example, if you have an essay due on April 1st and two essays due on April 2nd and an exam on April 4th you may choose to create different deadlines for these items in your big picture calendar. Perhaps you will record it as an essay due March 15th, an essay due March 22nd, an essay due March 30th and an April 4th exam. An essay is the same amount of work regardless of when it is written; these artificial deadlines are a gift you can give to your future self. The hardest part is not letting yourself put things off because "it's not the real deadline."

Asking for extensions is not a time management strategy. Multiple competing deadlines is seen as a given in postsecondary education and your professors and academic advisors will not see this as a valid reason for changing a due date or rescheduling an exam.

Events in your personal life that take a day or more will need to taken into account when you are creating your work plan for the term. You will need to think about how much time the event will subtract from your usual work and make plans for what days this work can be done ahead of time.

Personal commitments are also a good time to use the technique of the Artificial Deadline. For example, if you are taking two days of First Aid training on Saturday and Sunday and you have an essay due the Tuesday after, you may choose to create the false deadline of having the essay completed the Friday before your training.

Most employers in professional settings expect employees to independently organize their work so that they can complete multiple projects with different deadlines. In fact, questions about your time management strategies and experience are very common in professional interviews. Developing strong project time management skills while you are a university student will be something that you will be able to use throughout your career.

Weekly schedule

Time	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
7:30 – 8:30							
8:30 – 9:30							
9:30 – 10:30							
10:30 – 11:30							
11:30 – 12:30							
12:30 – 1:30							
1:30 – 2:30							
2:30 – 3:30							
3:30 – 4:30							
4:30 – 5:30							
6:30 – 7:30							
7:30 – 8:30							
8:30 – 9:30							
9:30 – 10:30							

To-Do List