



Twelfth Thing: Time Management

Keen to master the art of balancing multiple tasks and commitments? Carla Stewart from Academic Skills takes you through some tips and tools on how to manage your time effectively. This Thing also features an interview with planning addict, Daniel De Oliveira Vasconcelos (PhD candidate from the Melbourne School of Design), who shares his time management secrets.

In 1997, I started a degree here at the University of Melbourne. Despite excelling in school, like many others, I struggled with the transition to university demands; specifically, managing my time and tasks. My experience shifted by 2014 when I pursued graduate study after many years of teaching. Although there were challenges, teaching helped me develop organisation, thoroughness and time management but it would have been a lot easier if I had taken the time to learn and hone time management skills as a university student.

Time management is one of those skills that nobody explicitly teaches us but is fundamental to success. While advice urges us to plan, start early and avoid procrastination, the practical ‘how’ is often omitted. Graduate researchers will realise that their programs lack the structure found in undergraduate study. With fewer classes and deadlines and less feedback, self-direction becomes pivotal because there is the incessant pressure of having to research, write and defend your thesis in all that undirected time. However, try to see this as a blessing rather than a curse. You get to decide when and how to spend your time, what you’ll read or study, and when you’ll do it. With some practical tips and a pragmatic approach, it’s not that difficult to take control of your success.

Time blocking

Time blocking is a powerful technique that can enhance your organisation and productivity. Essentially, this method involves planning out almost every moment of your day and dividing it into

blocks of time. Each block is dedicated to a particular task, such as '9am-11am: research and ideation'; '11:30am-1230pm: answer emails'. This model also blocks time for breaks and exercise, social activities, appointments, or work commitments. By allocating specific time blocks to tasks, you're creating dedicated periods of focused work. This minimises multitasking and distractions and forces you to prioritise tasks, preventing less important ones from overshadowing the more crucial tasks.

High-,mid- and low-level time management

Thinking about time management on multiple levels can provide a comprehensive framework for your time and tasks. At the high level, you will be thinking about long-term planning, which involves looking at the entire semester or academic year, allowing you to balance commitments, identify milestones for significant tasks and allocate resources, such as time and energy. For example, your high-level goal might be 'search for relevant literature'. A Gantt chart or this [Semester Planner](#) may help you visualise your priorities at a higher level.

At the mid-level, you will be thinking about monthly and weekly planning to transfer your high-level goals into actionable steps, so your goal might be to 'create a list or spreadsheet containing the details of relevant articles'. Your calendar or this [Weekly Planner](#) might come in handy here.

At the lower level, daily execution and micro-planning come into play. An associated low-level goal might be to 'annotate and summarise one relevant article'. You might consider the time-blocking technique here, ensuring each day's tasks are well-defined and SMART.

Work smart

SMART goals are a good way to help time-block clear goals, increasing your chances of reaching them. A well-devised goal is SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound. For example, if you have time-blocked out two hours for research in your calendar, your goal might be: 'In this **two-hour** period, I will locate **one** article on <insert specific topic>, then use Zotero to **annotate and summarise** the relevant points for my research'. Having a clearly defined SMART goal allocated to each time-block in your calendar will ensure you stay on track and achieve your goals.

Managing distractions

Do you possess the willpower to effectively block out distractions such as social media notifications? It's a challenge we all face, but there are practical methods available to prevent getting side-tracked. While it's a simple directive to advise turning off notifications or activating airplane mode, it indeed demands a measure of self-discipline. If the temptation of the red notification dot proves irresistible, consider incorporating social media time blocks within your daily schedule or utilising one of the numerous available apps designed to enhance your focus and productivity.

Several students frequently find themselves falling into the procrastination trap – postponing tasks and inadequately prioritising them. I fell into that trap too. However, it is my hope that the perpetual struggle and overwhelm of having 'too much to do and too little time' will become a thing of the past for you. By utilising the strategies outlined here, you can strive to balance research, study and personal obligations. Remember: time management is a continuous process, and it may require adjustments and experimentation to find the techniques that work best for you. If all else fails, you can always [ask for help!](#) I wish I had.

Further resources

Academic Skills has published these invaluable resources to help you.

- [10 tips to manage time and tasks](#)
- [Managing graduate coursework](#)
- [Creating a revision program](#)

About the author

Carla Stewart is an Academic Skills Adviser here at the University of Melbourne. Academic Skills provides one-on-one advice, workshops and resources to help you develop the communication and study skills that will set you up to succeed in your next assignment, upcoming semester, further study, and career outside of university. Find out more at the [Academic Skills website](#).

Interview with Daniel De Oliveira Vasconcelos

What is your role and what is your research about?

I am a PhD candidate from the Melbourne School of Design, the University of Melbourne. My research investigates how work-related digital technologies are producing new spaces and new social dynamics at home. I do quantitative and qualitative research on home-based creative workers in Melbourne. I intend to understand how people are living and working at home and try to reflect on housing design that is more conducive to healthier domestic and work lives.

How have time management strategies helped you work smarter, not harder when managing your research?

I've always been a planning addict. Maybe because very early on, during high school, I also attended a business program, so management has always been part of my work (and personal) life. I apply this to my research as well. Strategies to manage time and tasks have helped me not only be on time with my research but also to control my anxiety and establish clear boundaries so that the research does not dominate all aspects of my life. Time management is crucial in this sense. I often see people working so hard, 10, 12 hours a day – but when I talk to many of them, I realise that half of their day was about procrastinating tasks that otherwise would only take a few hours. I'm very pragmatic: I don't want to waste hours of my time in front of a screen for something I can accomplish in much less time. At the same time, it is important to not overlook quality. Being too rigid with your time management may jeopardise tasks that should rather "go with the flow." But, in general, I would say that managing my time is good for my mental health and my research, in that I will prioritise the important things (we can easily get swollen by the endless readings, theories, and methods out there) to deliver good quality research.

What is your number one tip for managing your time?

I have weekly and daily plans. But the "secret" here is that I always plan a list of tasks that underestimate my productivity and real capabilities, while it is feasible to complete the overarching goal related to them. In other words, if I have to write a 10 thousand-word paper before the end of the year, I will make sure to plan a progression that results in the completion of the paper by breaking it down into smaller tasks, dividing them among the weeks and days I have available, to the

point that a daily task is relatively simple and not time-consuming. I do this for two reasons: first, because academic work (and other areas as well) always involves unplanned activities, lectures, commitments, etc. So leaving enough time for unpredicted or unplanned events is important; second, the fact that I underestimate my ability to accomplish a daily task often means – in most cases, it happened this way – I’m able to produce more than I planned (especially when there are no surprises on that day), leaving a feeling of accomplishment and a bit extra motivation for the next day. The feeling would be something like “Wow, I wrote 500 words instead of only 200, I did great today!” So, that is my top one-time management strategy: look ahead, break down tasks into manageable little parts, leave space for unplanned events, and make sure that what is planned is always less than what I can actually do.

Having said this, it is important to emphasise that being pragmatic with time management does not mean creating shortcuts at the expenses of hard work, but rather having a clear vision of the goal and how to achieve it without compromising work quality and mental health. For example, some people, especially in this age of generative AI, might think that relying on summaries of books and articles saves time, when in fact this shortcut, disguised as “work smarter,” only prevents them from building a strong foundation in their area of expertise. Instead, we can use AI applications to help us dig up new publications, transcribe data, organise data reports, proofread texts, etc. Time management, for me, is to optimise tasks so that I can dedicate enough time to read, reflect, and debate ideas. Knowledge relies on the maturation of ideas over time, and administering time for this end is “working smarter” in academic or scientific fields.

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