

Procrastination

Procrastination is likened to the Physics concept of inertia—a mass at rest tends to stay at rest. Greater forces are required to start change than sustain change.

Let's face it: in your college years, you are bound to procrastinate at one time or another. A little bit of task avoidance is probably not going to hurt you in the long run. Rather, it's the *habit* of always putting off tasks and assignments that is truly detrimental to your academic health.

There can be several causes at the root of a procrastination problem. Here's a quick summary of the main ones and tips for overcoming them.

Crooked Thinking

Crooked thinking involves deceiving yourself about how much work is to be done, the amount of time your extracurricular commitments really take up, or similar such aversions to reality. A closer look at our crooked thinking reveals three major delaying tactics:

Perfectionism

Those who believe they must turn in the most exemplary work may wait until all available resources have been reviewed, or endlessly rewrite draft after draft.

Inadequacy

Those who "know for a fact" they are incompetent often believe they will fail, and will put off the unpleasantness of having their "inadequate" skills put to the test.

Discomfort

We wrongfully assume that actually beginning the task will be more painful than waiting until the last minute. The more we delay, however, the more the problem becomes discomforting and the task becomes harder.

Behavioral Patterns

Getting started on an unpleasant or difficult task may seem impossible. However, avoiding tasks reinforces procrastination, which makes it harder to get things going (what a vicious cycle)! A person may be stuck, too, not by the lack of desire, but by not knowing what to do. Here are some things to break the habit (remember - don't just read them, do them):

- **Give yourself a pep talk and dismiss old excuses.**
On a sheet of paper, write all the excuses you've used to avoid doing work. Then, on the other side, write down countering positive thoughts, affirmations, and realistic suggestions.
Tell yourself what you are good at!
- **Don't overreact or assume the worst.**
Sidestep the doomsday talk and just make a plan of action to finish the task at hand. Break it up into smaller bits and reward yourself after each part is completed.
- **Set attainable and clear goals.**
It's hard to get somewhere if you don't know where you are going. Listing goals gives you a clear picture of where you are trying to be; break down your goals into small steps, so that your path is clear and easily accomplished.
- **Prioritize.**
Setting priorities shows you what you need to put the most focus on and where you should direct the most attention. For example, completing that history term paper should probably be higher on the priority list than cooking dinner for your suitemates.
- **Get organized and stay that way.**
Have all your materials ready before you begin a task. Use a daily schedule and have it with you all the time. List the tasks of the day or week realistically. Check off the tasks when you have completed them.
- **Take a stand!**

Commit yourself to doing the task. Write yourself a “contract” and sign it. Better still; tell a friend, partner, or supervisor about your plans.

- **Reward yourself.**

After completing a task, give yourself a reasonable reward such as a quick snack, a few minutes on AIM, or a quick phone call to a friend to catch up.

Deeper Reasons for Procrastinating

Perfectionism and fear of failure

In high school, no doubt, you were used to being one of the best in the class. At Hopkins, that all changed and now you may find yourself struggling to do well, but still knowing that you have some real intellectual talent (otherwise you wouldn't be at this University in the first place). Procrastinating has become a habit because you know the quality of work you can do, yet you fear that, in comparison to your peers, it is not good enough. It's the fear of failure, or just the fear of mediocrity, that drives your unwillingness to start or finish a task.

Anxiety and “catastrophizing”

Being anxious is often a consequence of one's inability to make decisions, whether it is about a paper topic or a confrontation with a wronged friend. Once the pressure and workload builds up, students have a “woe is me” tendency to catastrophize their situation.

Anger and impatience

Students, not professors or parents, tend to be the ones who put the greatest amount of pressure on themselves. They set unreasonable or unattainable goals and then beat themselves up when those goals are not met. For example, a student determines that he will start and complete his history assignment in one sitting, starting at 9 pm. At 2 am, with little more than a quarter of the assignment done, he's frustrated and angry with himself. This frustration stems from the student not being realistic with himself, his workload, or his goals.

Grandiosity

It is not uncommon to see the overworked, drained Hopkins undergraduate putting on the face of a happy, involved student. Even though they seem to have figured out the perfect balance of school work, extracurricular activities, and a social life, in actuality, they may feel inadequate. They have so much to do that they get little done; they then cover up these feelings by blaming normal impediments for their lack of actual productivity.

Feelings of being overwhelmed

To some students, it's all or nothing. Many students have such a large workload, that, though they may accomplish some part of it, they never feel adequately productive. This feeling of never-ending work eventually brings the student down and extinguishes the desire to even start tackling the mess.

Perhaps you realize that you suffer from one or more of these deeper causes of procrastination. If this is the case, please make an appointment with your academic advisor, (410) 516-8216, and they will be happy to help you and perhaps redirect you to someone who can better guide you.

Procrastination Resources Available:

- Your academic advisor is always available for advice on time management.
- Contact Ms. Fay Day (410-516-8216) in OAA about Study Consulting.
- Helpful websites:
 - <http://www.utdallas.edu/counseling/selfhelp/procrastination.html>
 - <http://lonestar.texas.net/~mseifert/procrastination.html>
 - <http://www.uihealthcare.com/news/wellandgood/issue2/stress.html>
 - <http://researchnews.osu.edu/archive/procrast.htm>
 - <http://ub-counseling.buffalo.edu/stressprocrast.shtml>