

Overcome Procrastination

Getting On With It...

It is natural to avoid things that are unpleasant, tiring, difficult, or anxiety provoking.

Although it is natural and understandable, procrastination is the greatest threat faced by most academics. Procrastination will poison your productivity and maim your chances for tenure. It is the virulent disease that annihilates academic success. Inoculate yourself now.

The first line of defense against procrastination is simple: GET STARTED NOW! Of course, like so many essential aspects of life, this is easier to say than do.

The Tolerable Ten

The Weightlifter's Guide

The Internet Deferment Decree

The Tolerable Ten

If you've been putting something off, it helps to start small. Begin working for just ten minutes on the daunting tasks of your life.

Almost any task, no matter how unpleasant, or anxiety provoking, can be tolerated for a short amount of time. When you are having difficulty sitting down to work, set yourself the small but significant goal of working for just ten minutes on the project. After you've fulfilled that promise to yourself, you are free to either continue working or to stop.

Further Tips for the Tolerable Ten

1. If you haven't been working at all, start by doing anything and stop after ten minutes. In other words, the less you've been doing the lower your expectations should be at first. If you put in your ten minutes and you have succeeded. One of the main benefits of the tolerable ten is to start rebuilding your trust in yourself.
2. If you have been working fairly consistently, try using the tolerable ten for the hardest tasks, whether starting a section of rough draft writing, or contacting the advisor you've been avoiding.
3. Even on a day that is full of duties unrelated to your main academic goal, try to squeeze in a tolerable ten. Before you go to bed at night, check whether you've logged in ten, if not, do it then. A commitment to consistency will keep your conscious and unconscious mind connected with your project.
4. Reward yourself, at least mentally, for completing your daily ten. Focus on process rather than product. It is not whether the words you've just written were brilliant, it is that you sat down and did what you said you would do. Small, concrete rewards are ideal: ten minutes with the newspaper, a phone call to a friend, a relaxing bath, a scoop of ice cream, wearing your favorite shirt, a cup of cappuccino.
5. Precede time-sapping activities (such responding to email) with a tolerable ten.

The Weightlifter's Guide

In my experience, when academics are unable to achieve their goals they expect more of themselves in the future. This is a recipe for getting stuck.

For example, Jane, a student in sociology, was preparing for her comps and wanted to read five articles each day. On Monday she only read two articles, although they were long, dense, took four hours to complete and although she took good notes on both articles. Even though Jane had worked hard, she was discouraged because she had not met her goal. She decided that she needed to read eight articles on Tuesday to "keep up". Soon she was so behind her own schedule that she gave up completely and read no articles for the rest of the week.

Setting your goals too high is setting yourself up to fail.

Think of weightlifters in training: If a weightlifter tries on Monday to bench press 200 pounds and can't lift the bar, does she try to lift 250 pounds the next day? No! She takes weights off the bar until she finds an amount that she can lift. It is only slowly, with practice, that she can build up her muscles and increase her load. If you are consistently unable to meet your goals, reduce your expectations and then slowly build up your achievement muscles.

Remember, too, that the best weightlifters do not work out every day. Cross-training and days off are essential for optimal performance. See my section on how to avoid burnout.

The Internet Deferment Decree

Avoid Addictions

Most academics find that the most devious time-wasting activities are web searches and email checks. How often do you say, "I'll just check my email quickly before I start writing" and then find that you spent a half hour responding to messages that could have waited?

How often do you say, "I'll just do a quick search for another reference" and find yourself spending an hour in fascinating but irrelevant Internet sidetracks?

As one student put it: I call my favorite form of procrastination the "S.S.S." method: I log on, and then SURF, SHOP, SPEND. These are the "S"s that stop success.

Avoid your habit and follow the Internet Deferment Decree: "Thou shalt not log in before a tolerable ten." This is the way to avoid Internet addictions: work first.

Use the Internet as a reward rather than a precursor to your toughest tasks. Even if you are waiting to see if you've gotten your grant, are expecting an important message from your advisor, or need to do a new literature search on the computer, first work on your most important academic project for just ten minutes before "examining" anything else.

Keep in mind the Basic Physics Theorem of Fighting Procrastination:

NEWTON'S LAW
A BODY AT REST STAYS AT REST,
A BODY IN MOTION STAYS IN MOTION
So GET STARTED NOW!
NOW!

That's right, this edict includes perusing this page. Close this window, leave my site and try working on the project you've been avoiding THIS MINUTE!