Wolfson Academic Skills

Time Management

As an independent learner you will have discovered how important it is to manage your time effectively. This guide suggests tools and ways of planning your time to help you keep on top of your studies.

What do you need to do?
Before attending to the first thing that springs to mind, ask yourself: what has to be done now and what can wait? The best way to prioritise is not to have a single to-do list but instead divide tasks into a number of different timescales:

- short term (morning, afternoon, daily)
- medium term (week)
- long term (monthly, termly or longer if dealing with a dissertation, project or thesis).

When do you need to do it?
Rank your lists or colour-code them so you can easily see what needs to be done first. Be strict and stick to it. Try to complete one task at a time. It is more satisfying to have one thing ticked off than several, half-finished jobs.

How are you going to do it?
Break your tasks down into manageable chunks. Putting ‘Write essay’ or ‘Read book’ on a to-do list isn’t very helpful. Instead, make your objectives SMART:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Realistic
- Timely

By taking this approach, the above tasks become: ‘Draft essay introduction on Monday 9-11am in Wolfson Library’ or ‘Read chapters 3 & 4 between 5 and 6pm on Tuesday and make notes in Zotero’. That way, you know exactly what needs doing, are more likely to be able to get the job done and know what remains to do if you run out of time.

Where are you going to do it?
Think about your study space. Will you be more productive in your room where everything is to hand? Or are there too many distractions at home and will you benefit from working in the library, with others? Wherever you are based, make sure it is comfy, well-lit and organised.

If you need inspiration have a look at Spacefinder, which covers libraries, cafes and outdoor spaces in Cambridge, tagged to help you find a place to meet your needs http://spacefinder.lib.cam.ac.uk/

If you are tempted to spend too much time browsing the web or on social media, there are apps that will lock you out of websites for a limited period. To help you focus your energy on your studies.

Find tools at http://libguides.cam.ac.uk/wolfsoncollege/digitalwellbeing
Tools

Post-its work well to remind you to do things but they do rely on you being in one place to see them. Consider using technology to help you, wherever you are.

Any.do and Trello specialise in this area. They are project-based and work especially well for longer-term goals, helping you see what needs doing as well as what you have achieved.

If you are particularly attached to post-its, try Googlekeep. As well as taking notes free-hand you can attach images and audio. It syncs with Google Calendar to remind you to do something.

Notetaking software such as OneNote and Evernote lets you set up alerts from their notebook approach for ‘to-do’ lists.

Organise your files

This means online and physically. You will save yourself lots of time if you can find things straight away.

If you work on paper, label and number your notes, include titles and dates. Use colour or different notebooks to demarcate different topics. File loose handouts in an orderly fashion in A4 wallets, box files or ring binders.

Your computer needs even more attention. Don’t use your desktop as a dumping ground for everything you download. Create a clear file structure and anticipate what you might create. Having an empty folder is less of an issue than putting everything in one long list and planning to put it in order later. Rename downloaded files straight away and use dates where practicable to divide up work. Nest folders to keep each level of storage to a minimum; having 50 folders on your desktop is just as confusing as having 50 documents.

Within a folder consider a file naming convention such as this:

prefix (for document type e.g. report, notes, essay) _meaningful document title_version_yymmdd

Motivation

There will be times when you are uninspired or struggle with work. This can prevent you from using your time effectively. To maintain motivation think about:

• Reasons for studying
• Manageable goals
• Successes
• Sources of help and support

Try to reflect on challenges, which will help you learn from the experience.

Reward yourself

Time management is as much about resting as working and you should take breaks whether you have completed your task or not. It is important for your eyes and back, plus it will help you stay focused so that you can return with renewed interest and energy. For short breaks there are tools such as EyeLeo, which force you to look away from the screen. Every hour, timetable in a cup of tea, the chance to check your phone or take a 5 minute walk.

During longer breaks, make sure you are still doing things you enjoy; find time to socialise, exercise and relax. If you have timetabled these into your week then you don’t need to feel guilty when taking a break. Instead, look forward to them and hopefully you’ll be more productive knowing that you have to finish at a certain time.