

Procrastination

It's four...five...maybe even six in the morning. Actually, you know exactly what time it is: 7:32 AM. But you swear it ought to be earlier, because you still have three and a half pages to write (even in Courier New) before class starts at 9:20. You'd be closer to done, but that last cup of coffee got lost in your stomach and never reached your head. It's still churning around, looking for the exit. Any exit. Besides, you're not really concentrating on the writing anyway. Your brain has been busy auditioning extension excuses for the last four hours. And you would give your right eye (which hurts anyway) for three hours of sleep.

Sound familiar?

People procrastinate for all sorts of reasons. They feel like they write better under pressure, or they aren't very good at getting started, or they intend to start early right up until the moment their roommates turn on the TV or their friends ask them to play a round of frisbee golf. For some people all-nighters are just the way it's done.

Often, procrastination is a matter of priorities. In this situation, procrastination is really another word for "time management gone awry" or even just "time management." A long, panicky night followed by a gritty-eyed, headachy day may be called for if it's your last final anyway or if there was a party the day before that absolutely could not be missed. On the other hand, such agony may be the accidental result of letting yourself get sucked into a few too many hours of not-very-earthshaking TV. So:

Procrastination Rule #1: Be aware of the time management choices you are making, and especially be aware of the consequences your choices will have.

Sometimes procrastination happens despite all efforts to the contrary. Perhaps you are a person who actually attempts to write before the last minute, but it just doesn't work. You sit in front of the blank computer screen and can't squeeze a single thought out, so you decide to try again later. It never works though, not until your very last chance to write it on time. This type of procrastination is closely related to writer's block, and if the example above sounds like you, you may want to check out our handout on beating writer's block.

Procrastination due to writer's block happens for one of two reasons:

One reason is that your writing process may be unnecessarily complicated. You want the paper to turn out well, plus you're trying to keep it to one draft so you can finish as soon as possible. Perhaps you expect it to somehow spout out of your fingertips, from the title to the last concluding period. As a result, you can't let yourself write anything that isn't of final draft quality. Each sentence takes so long to write that you can't maintain your train of thought, and you give up out of frustration.

The other major cause of writer's block is fear. A blank page is intimidating, especially if you are unsure of your ability to write well. Writers expect to be able to put words on paper without practicing the necessary steps, yet after skipping two weeks of Principles of Biology, anyone would be a little nervous about pop quizzes. If you don't know the necessary steps to solve an equation, the quiz seems impossible.

Writing is the same way. Just as there are many steps in solving an equation, there are many steps in the writing process. You must generate your ideas, organize them, support them, and connect them in meaningful ways. Keeping yourself to one draft seems like it ought to save time, and writing a paper from beginning to end seems to make the most sense. However, writing that way means that that every process listed above must operate at once; more often than not, your thoughts end up in a train wreck.

A better way to save time is to cut down on the percentage of time you spend staring blankly at the screen. Don't limit yourself to crafted sentences, and don't require yourself to write a specific part of your paper just because it's supposed to come next. Instead, skip around. If you are stuck on the introduction, work on the middle for a bit. If you come up with something you want to say, but you're not sure where it will go, don't keep it in your head. Jot it down somewhere. If you can't think of the right word, use a wrong word and keep going. It might help to add brackets or an asterisk or some other marker to help you find the place later. Jump back and forth between idea generation, support, and connection, but work on them one at a time. The most important part of writing is to get something, anything, on the page. It gets easier after that.

Procrastination Rule #2: A terrible paper can be revised. A non-existent paper is harder to work on.

People may also try to write ahead of time but then procrastinate anyway due to technical difficulties. Perhaps those stupid commas are impossible to figure out, or maybe nobody ever explained exactly how to research that slightly obscure topic.

There is help available, all over campus. Depending on what exactly has you stuck, you may want to talk to your professor, go to the library's help desk, or come in to the Writing Center. So:

Procrastination Rule #3: If you need help, go get it. Even if it's too late to save your current paper, it's never too early to make the next paper easier.

Procrastination can also seem attractive when you are feeling overwhelmed by the task at hand. Of course, there are some fairly easy steps you can take in order to minimize the workload. There are many parts of the writing process, and just like with any other big, scary task on your to-do list, it may help to break it into smaller, more approachable tasks. It works best when you address these steps in order.

Some things are important to cover early in your writing process, generally before you even start generating text: brainstorming, finding a workable thesis, checking that your thesis will answer the assignment, organizing your thoughts.

The following things should be addressed later in your writing process, and can actually get in the way if you worry about them prematurely: length adjustment, word choice, grammar and spelling check.

It will help in the long run to develop a specific and consistent writing strategy. After a while, organizing your writing efforts will be so easy that you won't even have to think about it.

Procrastination Rule #4: One step at a time. Organize yourself and your writing process. Writing will be easier and your papers will turn out better.

Finally, procrastination may just be a bad habit resulting from the fact that nobody nags you about homework anymore. If this is the case, then the answer is simple: Stop.

In order to do so, you will have to pay attention to the situations and thought processes that lead you to procrastinate, and find ways to counteract them. If you are easily distracted, you may want to work in a quieter place, where the roommate's TV can't seduce you. Tell your friends when you plan to work, and forbid them to invite you to do other things. If your procrastination is a time management issue, think harder about the unpleasant consequences of procrastination: the grainy eyes, the fatigue headaches, the bad moods your friends will have to deal with.

Procrastination Rule #5: Find a way to remind yourself that getting it over with really is better. Believe it, too.

Procrastination may seem like an unavoidable aspect of college life, but in many cases it really is curable. Just remember: Nowhere does it say that sleep deprivation is a prerequisite for writing a paper.