Focus on
Time Management

Most people find it necessary to pace themselves through the semester, to make sure that nothing important gets forgotten or rushed.

**Why have a time plan?**

- It’s hard to keep schedules in your head, particularly if they are detailed.
- You are likely to have other things – besides study – which need to be planned.
- The plan helps you to keep track of what needs to be done, and when it needs to be finished.
- Your plan needs to be reviewed regularly – if that doesn’t happen it is useless.

**What methods could you use?**

- Consider the time spans which you have to plan for: days, weeks, months, terms, semesters, academic years, calendar years.
- Decide what kinds of format you prefer: list, chart (A4 size or poster), diary, diary/organiser, electronic organiser, e-mail calendar or task list, wall calendar.
- A combination of two or more of these might work well (e.g. a diary with your known commitments entered, and a list of current tasks which is updated daily).
- Enter appointments in your diary in pencil – they can be altered more easily.
- Alongside your time plan, carry a note book and use it jot down ideas, references and sources that you come across.

**What would be in the plan?**

- Everything you need to do. This is likely to include studies, employment, family arrangements, holidays, leisure activities.
- It should be possible to enter time-tabled hours, deadlines for assignments and exam dates first.
- Add other fixed events (e.g. work experience, field trips).
- Identify and sort out any overlaps (e.g. a presentation scheduled to take place during your work experience week).
You may decide to analyse how you actually spend your time:

For this you can use charts organised by hour/day, which give space for your follow-up analysis. It will then be easier to devise a plan which meets your needs.

If attempted accurately, this will show you:

- how you typically waste time
- which activities can be reduced or eliminated
- where ‘spare’ blocks of time can be used (e.g. reviewing your lecture notes whilst on the bus or train)

Similarly, you can analyse how you actually spend your time during a private study period of two or three hours.

**Using a time plan**

To make good use of a time plan you need to think in terms of tasks to be done. These are likely to be smaller than assignments: an assignment can be broken down into its component tasks.

**Prioritising**

List your tasks. To prioritise them you could:

- number in order of urgency
- colour-code – e.g. red for the most urgent
- have two lists – must do today and could do today
- use an e-mail task list
- use filing trays – either with lists or instead of them

Priorities are always changing. Keep your system under close review.

Cross off (or put away) items which have been completed – that way you can see progress.

**Allotting time to your study tasks**

- Most work can be split into component tasks. Put these in your plan as separate items (e.g. for an essay: analyse the question; access research material; consolidate ideas; decide which material to use; write draft; modify; prepare final version; check it, and so on).
- Define tasks clearly (e.g. ‘read Chapter 3, Smith & Brown’ – not ‘do some reading’).
- Estimate as realistically as possible how long each component task will take, and enter in your plan.
- Anticipate when something might take longer, for reasons you can’t control (e.g. extra time needed for ordered books to arrive, or waiting to use a computer).
- Start on a task early, while the details are fresh in your mind (e.g. review lecture notes soon after the lecture; start to note down ideas for an assignment straight away, and sort them into order).
- Spend time on each subject in the same slots each week (e.g. reading for a seminar; reviewing lecture notes; writing up laboratory reports). That way you are not likely to neglect important preparation and follow-up.
- Know which is your best time of day for concentration, and plan accordingly.
- Aim to do more than is asked of you (e.g. wider reading will familiarise you with concepts which will be useful in your studies and in the longer term).
- Don’t underestimate the usefulness of thinking time. Read assignments as soon as you get them and let your mind get to work on the possibilities.
Review your plan at least once a day. Check:
- what has been completed
- what still needs to be done
- what can be deleted
- what is to be added

Time planning for projects

Time planning is a very important part of a project, and deserves much thought and effort in the early stages.

How do you plan?
- Gauge your total time allowed, and the deadline date.
- Split the project work into its component tasks, and list them.
- Decide the order in which everything needs to be done.
- You are likely to find that you cannot start certain tasks until others have been started or completed (e.g. before writing the questions for a survey, you need to decide what you wish to find out, from whom, how you will analyse the results, etc.)
- Other tasks might well overlap.
- Allocate a length of time to each task. It might be in days, or in weeks, depending on the scale of the project.
- Decide on the likely start and finish dates for each task.
- If you get stuck, try filling in those tasks which need to be done at the end, then working back towards those you put in at the beginning.
- Pay attention to the final tasks (e.g. ‘writing up’ or ‘preparing a presentation’ need to be split down further; ‘proof reading’ and ‘printing’ can take a surprisingly long time).

Obstacles

Anticipate and plan for anything which might obstruct your project:
- resources (e.g. there are restrictions on use of equipment; materials have to be ordered; people you must see are only available at certain times).
- time (e.g. revision, exams, holidays, employment).
- What format will you use for your time plan?
- A one-page chart is clearest (e.g. a Gantt chart). They can be electronically produced or written on a pre-printed form.
- Check to see what format is recommended in your instructions. There might be an example you could follow.
- Block in your tasks and dates. It is clearer to use dates rather than week numbers.
- It may need re-working several times before you are satisfied.
- There may be penalties for poorly devised and executed plans.

Review
- The plan will need to be reviewed regularly as the work progresses.
- It might need to be changed. Major changes are best avoided, especially where the planning process itself is being assessed.
Organising private study

You can save a great deal of time and effort by being well organised in your working arrangements and your study time. The systems you use depend on your preferred ways of working:

Where will you work?

You might need access to specific facilities (e.g. the library: for ‘reference only’ books, electronic searches or a quiet area). Find out which are the least busy times.

You might want to work with or near other people. Perhaps this increases your self-motivation; or you have a group assignment, or you belong to a self-help group which shares resources.

At other times you will choose to work alone because you need to concentrate more deeply. For study periods at home you’ll probably need:

- desk space, where you can spread out your papers
- a comfortable chair, at correct height/angle for use with desk and computer
- storage shelves/boxes, to keep your books/notes/files in order and within reach
- stationery and equipment, including coloured pens for labelling
- notice board, for timetable/reminder notes/planning charts, etc
- good lighting
- controlled temperature: warmth, or a fan in summer
- ventilation
- quiet, or some background music
- a notice on the door to prevent interruptions

Your private study session

- Start on time. If you are distracted by something else which needs doing, deal with it first
- It’s a good idea to have a plan for each study session so that you make the best use of your time.
- List the tasks which you intend to do, including an estimated amount of time for each.
- Make them specific (e.g. ‘re-read lecture notes on Picasso and check for understanding: 15mins’; ‘make notes on chapter 14, Jones & Grey: 30mins’).

If studying for a couple of hours or more, aim to do a few different tasks rather than one long one. Your mind will be refreshed by a change of topic or a different kind of activity (e.g. reading, writing, making notes, planning, solving).

- Try to actually finish something, or part of something, at each session – it helps your motivation.
- At the end of your study period, spend a few minutes reviewing what you have achieved. Note down what needs to be done next, for each task.

Concentration

- Be aware of your own concentration span. For intense concentration, it is unlikely to be more than 30 or 40 minutes.
- Taking a 5 or 10 minute break every so often allows you to refresh your mind.
- Equally, new ideas may occur to you during your break.