Time Management – Managing Study

In a way, being a successful student means managing: managing ourselves. We often think of this as managing time; but along with time we should think of space. As well as organising time to study, having a place which is ‘our own’ study space is very important. And then, general ideas of management are also important: as a successful student, we have goals, we can prioritise, we can plan; and we can take stock of these processes.

But we must also remember that there are different management styles, some formal, some informal, thus weekly planner sheets and ‘to do’ lists don’t suit everyone. And in the final instance we should be aware that management can have negative impacts, as well as positive ones: these processes of self-management must be realistic, taking account of human factors such as the need to maintain our health, recreation, and positive attitudes to life!

Study Management

It is useful to think of study management as a particular type of management in general, so that we can set goals, prioritise, plan and monitor our progress.

But before we can do this, we have to get a clear ‘big-picture’ of the course we’re undertaking…

Time Frame - understanding your Course

When we inquire about a course of study, when we enroll, we are given overview documents. These will be:

- a department outline, showing the overall pattern of how our chosen course connects, ‘articulates’ with other courses
- a course outline, showing the subjects in our course and their starting & finishing dates
- a weekly time table for the course.

We can use these documents to do our initial planning for the course. We should set up a general course folder with these documents at the front, and dividers marking off the areas where we’ll file the materials for each subject. We should also file here a blank semester planning document – more on this in a moment!

As well as a course folder, these overview documents give us the beginning of our general ‘picture’ of the course, which as much as possible should be a ‘mind structure’, a composite understanding of those overview documents in our folder. One rule of thumb here is that for every hour of class time, we will need an hour of study outside class.

Making your Study Space

It’s now understood that a safe, quiet, comfortable and private study area is of considerable value to the success of study.

You’ll need a desk or table with storage space for books & papers, a suitable chair and appropriate lighting. An armchair for reading & note taking is useful also. If you’re lucky enough to have your own computer, the screen should be at an appropriate height (its top at eye level), with lighting to the side.

It’s also important to involve the other members of your household in this process, especially since families of students can feel that the study is depriving them of a mother or partner. Keeping them informed of your study hours, and the busy times in the semester – so that they can be supportive – is vital!
**Focusing your Goals**

*Why are you doing this course?*

It’s been shown that students who have real answers to this question are more successful, and manage their learning & study better. Try to make sure that you have a clear picture of your long term and short term goals both in your personal life and study life.

Where do you want to be in your life in five years? How will this course help take you there?

If you’ve initially entered the course more out of curiosity or interest, ask yourself how it may change your life for the better, and aim at this goal. Which areas of the course are you really interested in? Where must you take care because your interest is not so great?

For some of us, holding these goals in our mind and re-visiting them regularly is a good way to stay on track. Others may prefer to write their goals up, perhaps even displaying them in their study space.

What are my goals for this week? is a goal directed question; but now we’re moving toward more specific objectives, and these involve prioritising & planning.

**Prioritising**

Setting short term objectives such as getting reading, research & writing done in a timely way does involve us in prioritising, deciding on the relative importance & urgency of the tasks which are facing us.

But we often feel as a student that there are so many things to do that everything is pressing in on us, everything feels so urgent! Thus deciding which tasks to tackle in which order is most important, especially when we’re facing three deadlines on the same day!

A useful strategy here is to consider the importance of each of these tasks, as well as their urgency.

We can think of this diagrammatically:

![Importance vs. Urgency Diagram](after RMIT’s Tertiary Learning Skills)

When pressed by deadlines, it does matter that we give more time to the more important tasks; and are not distracted by tasks which are neither important nor urgent.

But the critical thing here is to manage time & work loads such that important tasks remain non-urgent; and this means planning!

**Planning**

We’ve mentioned that at the front of our general course folder, along with the course overview & weekly time table documents, we have a blank semester planning document. This is our basic planning document. Here’s the top corner of such a planner (weekends are included):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Week begin.</th>
<th>Mon</th>
<th>Tues</th>
<th>Wed</th>
<th>Thurs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>12 Jul</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>19 Jul</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>26 Jul</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Semester planners are useful aids in managing your study. With a planner you can schedule in all the deadlines and dates for a semester. On your semester planning sheet you need to note:

- major objectives e.g. the due dates for assignments and test/exam dates
- the dates of sub-objectives such as when you will start doing research, or finish the first draft of an assignment
- non-study activities that take up large amounts of your time such as work, holiday trips, etc.

Above all, you should be realistic as to how much time to allow yourself for tasks. Schedule your tasks & sub-tasks so that you will not have to finish any project on the day of a deadline! The semester planner sheet provides critical points and indicates how your study is progressing. It also shows you at a glance when things are going to be very demanding; or when you can put your feet up for a bit.

**Taking Stock – monitoring your Study**

While your weekly time table and semester planner are important documents, it’s critical not to overload yourself, to find yourself doing too much in a given time span. Thus it’s important to note where you’ve not estimated time needs adequately on your semester planner; and to re-adjust future times in the light of experience.

**Management’s not Everything**

In addition to suggesting semester planners, many study skills sources suggest a weekly planner, a diary, and “to do” lists.

Each of these aids can be a good idea, especially the weekly or daily “to do” list, and some students do benefit from this additional tracking.

**Your own approach, for You**

But not all students. The most important thing of all in managing your study is that you benefit from your course, that you enjoy it and gain in confidence and skills.

It is quite possible to over plan, and over-manage; and doing so undermines confidence & enjoyment. It’s vital to develop study management approaches which suit you, approaches from which you benefit.

**Troubleshooting**

Things will go wrong, but it’s not the end of the world. Remember that your physical & emotional health count more than anything, and make changes in your planning accordingly. (If you do get ill, be certain to contact classmates to arrange copies of class notes; and do get a medical certificate with which to negotiate extensions.)

Above all, if crises come, or if your planning goes badly wrong, seek help. This is why Student Services counseling, and the Study Skills Unit, exist!