

Setting Priorities

Most of us feel that there is too much to do and too little time. If you have this feeling, time management is a very important skill for you to learn. There are two aspects to time management:

1. Defining long-term goals to guide your use of time.
2. Prioritizing your tasks each day so that you can use your time most effectively.

If you have read “Identifying and Setting Goals,” then you have a list of goals and are ready for prioritizing your tasks.

In order to prioritize, it is helpful to keep a running list of tasks. If you don’t already have a “to do” list, make one now before you proceed.

As you look over your task list, do you see any tasks that will take more than a couple of hours to complete? If so, break them into separate tasks that require manageable chunks of three hours or less.

Next, assign priorities to each task, starting with ‘1’ for the most important. Here is an example of a 5-point scale:

- 1** = very important; must do; severe negative consequences if not completed.
- 2** = important; should do; but not as important as my ‘1’ tasks, and only minor negative consequences if not completed.
- 3** = would like to do; but not as important as ‘1’ or ‘2,’ and no negative consequences for not completing.
- 4** = delegate or assign to someone else who can do the task in my place.
- 5** = eliminate whenever possible.

As an example of how this works, let’s assume your list of tasks looks like this:

- Write a research paper for a literature class (3 days effort, due in a week)
- Complete problems for biology (3 hours of effort, due tomorrow)
- Attend the football game (3 hours, tonight)
- Watch TV (1 hour each night)

The first step is to break the big projects into parts, like this:

- Survey the literature for the research paper to determine what is available and define the topic (2 hours)
- Research first half of literature paper (3 hours)
- Research second half of literature paper (3 hours)
- Develop outline for research paper (1 hour)
- Write research paper (3 hours)
- Proof and format research paper (1 hour)
- Complete problems for biology (3 hours)
- Attend the football game (3 hours)
- Watch TV (1 hour each night)

Assuming you choose to spread the research paper over several days, your priorities might then look like this:

Today:

1. Survey the literature for the research paper to determine what is available and define the topic (2 hours)
2. Complete problems for biology (3 hours)
3. Attend the football game (if other tasks are completed)

Tomorrow:

1. Research first half of literature paper (3 hours)
2. Watch TV (1 hour, if other tasks are completed)
3. Other tasks assigned later

Unfinished tasks remaining for the next priorities list:

- Research second half of literature paper (3 hours)
- Develop outline for research paper (1 hour)
- Write research paper (3 hours)
- Proof and format research paper (1 hour)
- Watch TV (1 hour each night)
- Other tasks assigned later

Notice that fun activities also belong on the list, as having fun is essential to mental and physical health. You may use them as rewards for staying focused on less pleasurable tasks, or as energizers to get you moving before starting less pleasurable tasks. For tips on incorporating fun activities into your schedule, read “Balancing My Social Life.” Try prioritizing your own list of tasks based on your own set of long-term goals.

After completing the prioritizing process, you are ready to focus totally on your number 1 priority. When it is completed, give your undivided attention to your next priority. Some projects may seem so unpleasant that you push them out of your mind until the deadline is imminent. By setting priorities and scheduling time to complete a part of a large project each day, you ensure that the project will get done on time, thus reducing the anxiety. For more tips on dealing with large projects or unpleasant tasks, read “Avoiding Procrastination.”

Each day new tasks or activities will be added to your list, completed tasks will drop off, and tasks or activities you choose not to do will drop off. By organizing each day in this way, you can ensure that tasks that are essential to your long-term goals get the priority they deserve. For most of us, there will always be too little time for everything on our “to do” list, but by carefully prioritizing, we can be sure that the most important tasks or activities will get done.

For more help in managing your time, read the tools in “Planning and Managing My Time.”