

The Think Tank

A publication of the Academic Center for Excellence and the Writing Center
Volume 1, Issue 2 *October 1999*

Special Issue: Time Management

Free Time

by Jean-Paul Nadeau, Ph.D.

Freedom. We all want it, but some of us have a problem dealing with it. When I am most free--when I have all the time I need to do anything I want--I usually end up accomplishing very little. Because I like to be productive, I try to have fifteen things to do rather than only one or two.

College students must learn to manage the freedom that comes with living at their homes away from home. They must learn how to use their time wisely, how to juggle school, home, and social lives. If you feel you don't have the time to get your work done, this issue of *The Think Tank* is for you. In this issue, Writing Center staff, ACE staff, and Bryant faculty offer advice to students about time management. So set a few minutes aside, get comfortable, and learn how to make time for everything. ❖

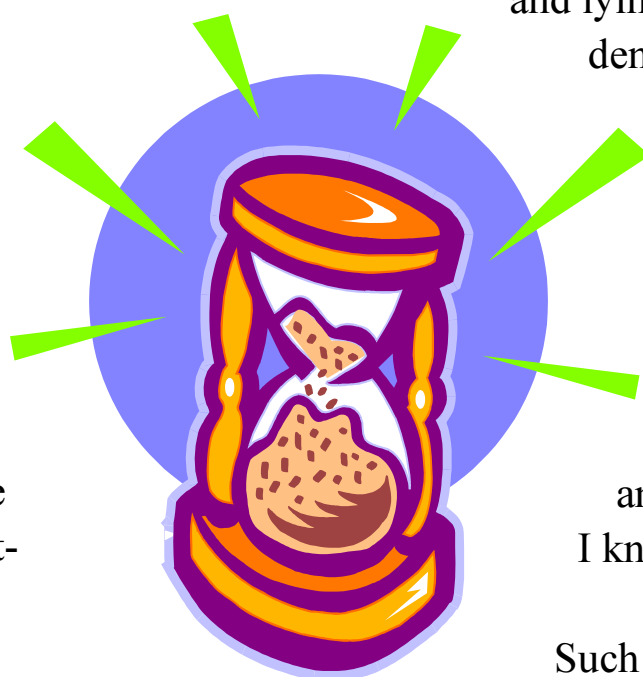
Procrastination: Time Management's Enemy

by Laurie Hazard, Ed.D.

Many students spend an inordinate amount of time constructing elaborate schedules, making "to do" lists, and recording assignments in their planners. All of these exercises and practices are a necessary part of setting and meeting semester goals. Utilizing these time management practices and setting academic goals makes students feel good; they've accomplished something; at the very least, they've organized themselves.

Unfortunately, some students who manage to get this far with time management practices and goal setting, fail to follow through on the master plan they've set up for themselves. Procrastination behaviors and maladaptive attitudes get in their way.

There are three major components to procrastination: fearing failure, engaging in replacement activities, and lying. In many instances, students will procrastinate because of self-doubt. They



“catastrophize” by feeding themselves negative thoughts, such as, “Why should I bother to attempt my math homework? I’ve never been good in math and no matter how hard I try, I know I’ll still fail.”

Such negative thoughts lead procrastinators to avoid subjects they fear or dislike and find replacement activities. Replacement activities include watching TV or playing video games, spending too much time on the telephone or hanging out with friends. These replacement activities are easy to recognize because they are not productive. Other replacement activities, however, are masked by productivity and not as easy to identify. Cleaning, for example, is a productive replacement activity.

Consider this scenario: Mary goes to her room in

Quote of the Month

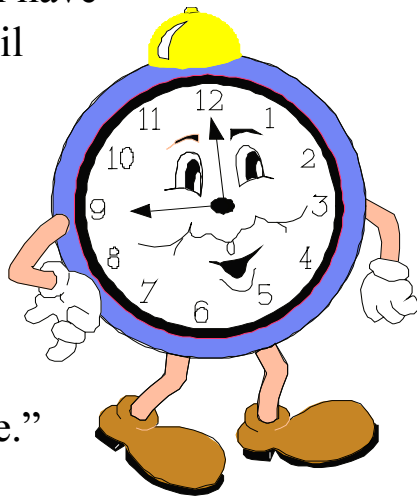
“I like work; it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours.”

-- author unknown

The Think Tank welcomes submissions from students, faculty, and staff. Send submissions to the Writing Center, Hall 6, 4th floor. This newsletter is published monthly through the Bryant College Academic Center for Excellence and the Writing Center.

between classes. She tells herself that she can't possibly study in her room until it's spotless. As a result, she cleans her room from top to bottom and is proud of what she's accomplished. She's worked so hard on her cleaning she tells herself that she deserves a break or a reward before she gets down to studying. She flits off to her neighbor's room for a visit and ignores the business text sitting on her desk. Before she realizes it, two hours have gone by.

Or this scenario: John has a paper due in his Liberal Arts Freshman Seminar course the following day. He hasn't even started it. John loves his math course, so although he's completed his homework in that class, he continues to do practice problems and is proud of how many he gets right. His roommate is struggling in math and John helps him; his roommate begins to understand the material, which makes John feel good. John tells himself that it's ok that he hasn't started his paper, "Even though it's 10 PM, I still have plenty of time; the paper isn't due until tomorrow afternoon. My professor seems like a nice person. Maybe I'll tell her my disk got corrupted and I have to retype the whole thing. She'll buy that and it will buy me more time. At least I'm doing well in math, and I even helped my roommate."



In both scenarios the students convince themselves that because they are being productive, it's ok to avoid priorities. This is where the lying component of procrastination emerges. When students procrastinate, they put themselves in the position of lying to themselves or to others. Ultimately, procrastination is a form of lying. Mary told herself that cleaning was more important than math, thus she should clean first. John cornered himself into the position of spinning a lie to feed his professor.

Replacement activities that are masked by productivity are very difficult to recognize. Students must keep their priorities in the forefront of their minds. Above all, students must learn to tune out the negative thoughts that keep them from tackling their work. At one time or another, we all have that negative tape recorder playing in our minds. Successful people tune out negative thoughts and persevere in the face of failure. As Michael Jordan said, "I've missed more than nine thousand shots in my career. I've lost almost three hundred games. Twenty six times I was trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed

over and over in my life and that is why I succeed." ❖

Perfect timing! A Pro-active procrastinator's guide

by Professor Lynda St. Clair

Perfect timing! Just as I was about to force myself to get some work done that I had been putting off, I received a call for submissions from *The Think Tank*. Clearly, it was my duty, as a concerned professor, to contribute to this important academic endeavor. My colleagues and students were depending on me I fired up my word processing program in gleeful anticipation of developing a fun, intellectually stimulating mini-epic. Then I noticed that the theme was time management – oops! Perhaps I wasn't the best person to be writing on that topic, particularly since my interest in writing for *The Think Tank* was inversely correlated with my interest in doing any of the other 29 (I counted) things on my to-do list.

The stereotypical view of procrastinators is that they are lazy or unmotivated. Their tasks don't get done because they are just goofing off, having fun. Certainly some people fall into this category. Most of them recognize that they are procrastinating and understand why. For them, the solution is straightforward (albeit not necessarily easy): they need to give up some leisure activities and get down to work. There are plenty of books and articles filled with good ideas for helping traditional procrastinators beat their habit of putting off work to pursue more pleasurable leisure activities.

There is, however, another group of procrastinators who also need help. These people are often not identified as procrastinators because they are always working very hard on real tasks, not out working on their tans or napping the afternoon away. Often, however, it turns out that these individuals are hard at work on the wrong things (such as writing an article for a college newsletter rather than revising a paper to submit to an academic journal). If you think you might be a proactive procrastinator, read on. Otherwise, quit reading now and get back to work!

For proactive procrastinators (and I confess to being one), the first and often most difficult step is just recognizing that we have a problem with procrastination (so if you're still reading, congratulations on making it through step one). Of course, most of us know that we have some kind of a problem because we feel completely overwhelmed. We often fail to recognize,

however, that our feelings of being overworked actually stem from our attempts to proactively procrastinate. If there is a task that we don't really want to do, we don't go watch a movie or out for pizza like a normal procrastinator might. No, we (in our warped wisdom) go find another task to do instead. Thus, our heavy workload is driven by our tendency to procrastinate. As we continue to seek out other tasks, our to-do list gets longer and longer, making us feel increasingly overworked. Because we are constantly at work on tasks, we don't think of ourselves as procrastinators, but procrastination is indeed the source of our problem.

Only after you've recognized yourself as a proactive procrastinator can you work to solve your problem. The next step is to try to identify what types of activities you tend to do first and which ones usually get put on the back burner. By finding examples of these kinds of activities you can look for common characteristics that help explain not only when but also why you procrastinate. For example, I have discovered that I really like to finish things. Small, do-able tasks generally find themselves at the top of my list even if they are not very important. Thus, I tend to procrastinate when it comes to large projects, even if they are very important, because I can't see the finish line. On the other hand, I really don't like to make telephone calls, so I tend to put them off.

By recognizing the types of activities that we tend to put off and gaining some understanding into why we avoid these tasks, we can come up with techniques to help us get past the tendency to proactively procrastinate. For example, when I have a large project, I don't put it down as a single line-item on my to-do list. I always break it up into small, do-able pieces. That way I get to check something off the list and feel as though I've made progress (which I have) even though the entire task hasn't been done. If I know I really need to make some telephone calls, I often start to work on a large project. I know that I'll reach a point of frustration where making those telephone calls will look pretty attractive to me because I can at least finish them.

Another trick I use when I'm having trouble getting started on my workday tasks is to put something that I've already done on my list and check it off. This is better than choosing another task to do because it takes less time to write something on the to-do list and check it off than it does to complete even a rela-

tively quick task. It may sound silly, but it works for me. By checking something off my to-do list, I feel that I've already gotten a start on my work so that makes it easier for me to tackle the next task on the list. As the fortune cookie quote I have taped to my computer says, "The secret of getting ahead is getting started."

Another important secret of getting ahead is knowing when to quit. Proactive procrastinators often prolong tasks unnecessarily. Playing with margins and spacing on papers or adding graphics and sound to presentations may be useful. If, however, you find yourself going back and forth between two different fonts and running the word count tool each time you revise a sentence, it's time to click "File Save" and move on to the next task.



When I started to dash off this article, it looked like a quick task. Just a couple of hundred words. . . . No doubt that was an important factor in my deciding to write it. As I found myself struggling for just the right words (over a thousand now), I realized it was a slightly longer-term project than I had initially thought. As a result, my to-do list is now down to 25 items – I made four of those phone calls that I had been putting off – and I still managed to finish this piece early enough to make it home before the sun set. Now that's what I call perfect timing! ❖

Sleep On It

by Mary Lou Wernig, *Writing Specialist*

It was two o'clock in the morning, and I had just finished my third Diet Coke of the evening. I was physically exhausted, but my brain was racing from all the caffeine I had pumped into my body. All I wanted to do was lie down, pull the blanket over my head, and escape, but, unfortunately, I still had to revise the essay I just finished writing for my first literature course at college. As I re-read what I had just written, I felt fairly impressed with myself. It didn't need any revision work at all! Maybe, just maybe, this was the paper I would ace this semester. I made a few minor editing changes and collapsed into bed with visions of an "A" paper flashing before my eyes.

A few weeks later my professor returned my paper to me. With excitement, I rushed to the last page to see my grade. I couldn't believe it! There, in red marker, was a "C." Why? How could I have gotten this grade?

Quickly, I re-read my paper and discovered how lucky I was to earn even this grade. How could I have thought this was a masterpiece?

This experience taught me that writing at the last minute is not a very productive or successful process. I also realized my critical skills aren't very sharp at three o'clock in the morning. More importantly, I learned that it is difficult to be a good judge of writing that you've *just* produced. I learned the hard way that it's a good idea to wait a while before reviewing something you've written--I now shoot for twenty-four hours in between draft and revision. Another good idea is to have someone else, such as your professor, a Writing Center staff member, or a classmate, read your writing and offer suggestions for revision. Over the years, both as a student and as a writing instructor, I have learned that strong writing is writing that has been revised several times. Stop by and see me in the Writing Center and we'll work on revising your latest paper. ❖

Come often, but come early

by Jean-Paul Nadeau, Ph.D.

It sure has been busy in the Writing Center lately. As one Writing Consultant put it, "Students are coming in droves!". Now that I've worked in the Center for a couple of years, I know that the recent surge in student visits will likely be followed by a lull.

While there are many days that we help ten, twenty, and even thirty students, there are also those days when we help only five or fewer students. There seem to be two reasons for this ebb and flow in the demand for writing assistance. Perhaps the more obvious is that students don't have a paper due every day. Much of our business depends on the submission deadline for the many essays, research papers, and team projects assigned to students. For this reason, we are usually busier at the end of the semester than at the beginning.

The second reason, however, is that students seem to be waiting until the day before their papers are due to visit the Writing Center. While I think it's wonderful that students think to have a reader for their work before submitting it for a grade, I do think that they would get much more out of the experience if they didn't think of the Center solely as the final portal through which their papers should pass.

Since this issue of *The Think Tank* deals with time management, I thought I'd explain how the Writing

Center might be useful in helping students break their writing down into manageable stages. We can be a useful resource throughout the writing process.

The Writing Center staff believes that writing is a process, that there are steps a writer takes to get to a final product. These steps include identifying the guidelines and demands of a written assignment, gathering ideas in response to those demands, organizing ideas, writing a piece of--or entire version of--the paper, reading over that version, and so on until a final version is "reached." We believe that writers are most successful when they recognize that 1) the process is often more cyclical than linear and 2) starting early means that they can take more time with each step.

Writing well often means going backwards before moving forward. In other words, you may decide that you need to generate additional evidence, an extended explanation, or an additional point after you have written a rough draft. Alternatively, you may decide that the argument you've constructed lacks a logical structure, so you make an outline from your draft and rework your organizational strategy. Just because you've got a version of your paper doesn't mean you can't continue to brainstorm, outline, and scribble. Use the writing process that works best for you.



By starting a paper early, I don't mean beginning the day before it's due. I mean that you should start to seriously think about the assignment the day you receive formal instructions from your professor. Faculty don't haphazardly assign writing in their courses; your management professor has reasons for giving you the low-down on your team project two months in advance. One reason, of course, is that s/he thinks it should take a student that long to produce a successful paper. Once you receive your instructions, try breaking the paper or project down into a series of deadlines in your daily planner. Force yourself, for example, to have an informal outline in a week and a rough draft in two weeks.

If you do so, you'll find that you have plenty of time to visit the Writing Center and have time to make necessary changes once you've received feedback. Too often students find themselves disappointed and frustrated because they realize too late that they haven't answered the question their professor asked...and their paper is due in two hours. Take my advice, and you'll reduce your chances of being in this situation. ❖