

How to Create a Task List

Sometimes even when you know what you have to do in order to reach your goals, it's hard to get started. Or perhaps you start, but then can't stay motivated. The end result is that papers, lab assignments and reading often get put off until the last minute. Ironically, the larger the task the more likely you are to put it off. That is why many students end up cramming large amounts of work into shorter periods of time as the term draws to a close.

Break assignments into smaller pieces

One possible remedy is to begin thinking of your assignment as a series of steps, a large rock you have to chip away at slowly, or a complex piece of machinery which must be broken into components. You can't do it all at once, and expecting yourself to do so just encourages more procrastination. Begin by splitting all your assignments into at least five steps. You may find that it's possible to complete more than one step at a time, and if you do, congratulations! Remember it's preferable to set a small achievable goal and go beyond it, rather than setting a large goal that you cannot attain.

1. Textbook Reading

- Read introduction and summary of chapters.
- Read titles and subtitles for an overview.
- Turn titles, subtitles into questions – pencil them in.
- Skim through questions in the study guide, or assignment.
- Decide how much of the chapter you are going to read now.
- Split your reading up. Take breaks at regular intervals.
- Read with the intention of finding answers to the questions.
- If you are catching up, you may want to have 1 hour of catch-up time before you begin regular studying.



2. Lab Assignments

- Read over the material to be covered in the lab.
- Read through the lab and write out any questions.
- Get answers to your questions through the lecturer, lab assistant or reading.
- Go over in your mind the various steps in completing the lab.
- Bring all of your "tools" that you need to do the lab.
- Complete the lab assignment and write it up during the lab time.
- Ask questions of the lab assistant if you don't understand something.
- Write up a final "good" copy of the lab.

3. Research Essays

- Read the research essay instructions.
- Brainstorm potential research topics.
- Visit the library to start some preliminary research.
- Zero in on a topic of study.
- Research that topic to gain further understanding.
- Develop thesis statement.
- Visit the professor or TA to ensure you are on the right track.
- Develop main arguments to support your thesis.
- Write a draft of the body of the essay.
- Write transition statements between the paragraphs.
- Write the introduction and conclusion.
- Proofread
- Create the bibliography of resources.



Adapted from University of Waterloo Counselling Services

Add due dates

After you have completed the task list for a project, assign each chunk a due date. Then estimate how long it will take you to accomplish each piece. Make sure to overestimate, just in case one section takes longer than anticipated. Start from the last thing you need to do to accomplish the task and work backwards. Aim to have your project completed a day or two ahead of time to provide additional flexibility.

Reward yourself

The second problem that sometimes prevents students from getting tasks done is that of discouragement. Even if you do get started, you may not stay motivated. Sometimes the old "carrot on a stick" technique can help. You may be surprised to find that the odd pat on the back will help you stay motivated.

Rest and relaxation

By plotting out some rewards for yourself you may naturally fall into a pattern of planned breaks from studying. This is important because researchers have found that students study more effectively when using a system of studying which includes breaks. For example, if you set a goal to study algebra for the next five hours it may end up feeling like a prison sentence. You are not likely going to be able to concentrate for that long and you may end up criticizing yourself and burning yourself out.

However, if you set some clearly defined small tasks and plan a short break at the end of each hour, your concentration will improve and so will your ability to complete the assignment without becoming frustrated. This will also ensure your breaks or leisure time are not consumed with you feeling guilty of what you feel you should be accomplishing.

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