Developing an Anti-Procrastination Plan: How to Beat Procrastination Before it Beats You

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Summary: Provides strategies for overcoming procrastination tendencies.
Learning Objectives: To describe strategies that learners can use to avoid procrastination. To name tasks that can be completed to develop a plan for success.

Procrastination is putting off or delaying a task, often until the last minute. Most of us procrastinate because the task seems insurmountable—either we feel that the task is too big or that we aren’t capable of doing it. And some of us procrastinate because we believe that we work best under pressure and at the last minute.

Whatever our reasons, the result is the same: a lot of work crammed into a short amount of time. You’re most likely here because you’ve figured out that procrastination not only causes a lot of stress and even poor quality work, it also creates a cycle.

The last thing we want to do after a period of concentrated and intensive efforts is move on to the next task. We want a break! That break then pushes off other tasks, which then must be finished at the last minute. All of a sudden, life feels like a game of catch-up that we can’t seem to win. **Whether you want to break the cycle of procrastination or beat it before it begins, the following plan and tips can help.**

**Step ONE: Own up to it.**
The first step to fixing a problem is admitting you have a problem. Look your procrastination in the eye. Ask yourself why you’re procrastinating. If the answer is something you can do something about, do something about it.

For example, if you’re procrastinating because you don’t know how to do or don’t where to begin the task, **go ask someone who does or find a resource** that can explain it. If you don’t understand an assignment, **call, email, or (even better) make an appointment to see your professor.** They don’t bite. If you need to do research but don’t know where to start, **go talk to a librarian**—they’re paid to help you find materials. And the internet isn’t called the “information highway” for nothing.

**Nowadays, you can search the Internet** for just about anything, and you won’t just find an article or website, you’ll find a personal blog, a step-by-step video and an online expert who answers submitted questions. On our website, for instance, you can access a number of handouts on the writing process as well as specific types of papers (response paper, resume and cover letter, research paper, etc).

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On a final note, keep good notes on where the information came from in order to avoid plagiarism if you’re using the information for a research project.

**Step TWO: Be positive.**
This may sound silly, but **giving yourself a pep talk can make all the difference.** Basically, remind yourself of the truths you know: you can complete this task, this task is tiny compared with the rest of your life, you have your health, etc.

Procrastination is caused by how we feel towards a task. So change how you feel about the task. Try posting sticky notes around you with positive phrases (I can do this!), journaling, recording your victory speech, or just working it out in your thoughts. Now, let’s turn the mountain back into a mole hill by planning for success.

**Step THREE: Plan for success.**
Those who fail to plan, plan to fail. So plan to be successful.

**Break the task up into small chunks.** The chunks are always less intimidating than the entire task. For example, a research paper could be broken into read/talk to resources on research papers, do preliminary research, read and annotate research, define working thesis, complete outline, do more research, read and annotate research, etc.

*Schedule mini-deadlines for the chunks.* This helps you consider and realize the time needed to complete the task and thus keeps you from putting the paper or project off until the day before it is due. If it’s a written assignment, you might schedule multiple tutoring sessions—having to show someone your work and what you’ve accomplished since the last tutoring session might provide some motivation, and it always helps to talk about your work with someone.

*Hint: Allow for more time than you think you actually need with your deadlines.* Things go wrong. If you get done early, you have time to celebrate.

*Write down reminders and put them where you can see them.* Write reminders on your bathroom mirror. Set alarms on your phone. Try Google Calendar that will send email alerts. **Use the countless tools at your disposal to keep you on track** and to break the procrastination habit.

*Find your spot.* Your brain is looking for a task to do instead of the task you’re avoiding. You’ve got to find the place where you won’t be distracted to do something else. Shield yourself against distractions: Turn off your cell phone. Unplug your TV. Log out of Facebook. Hide in an un-frequented part of the library. **Everyone’s a little different, so find what works for you.**

*Reward yourself.* At the completion of each mini-task, plan to do something fun. Call a friend. Play a video game. Make it proportionate to the task though. In other words, don’t spend all night watching movies after reviewing one chapter.

**Step FOUR: Enlist a partner.**
No climber tackled Mt. Everest alone. Even though we’ve already turned the mountain back into a mole hill, **you need support in your corner.**

Some call this person an accountability partner. Choose a positive, encouraging person who has good attention to detail. **Let that person know your plans so he/she can ask**
how they’re going. Then, that person can offer wisdom on getting the task done, congratulate you when you make those mini-deadlines, give you a pep talk when you’re feeling unsuccessful, and launch you back into action if you’re losing to procrastination.

**Step FIVE: Create a Crisis Control Plan.**
Things are going to go wrong. Life throws curve balls. Expect them. Then free yourself from the prison of perfectionism—you’re going to make mistakes and that’s ok. Instead of giving up at the first sign of trouble, decide what you’re going to do before trouble shows up.

What if you get bogged down in a task? Plan to take a short break. Again, schedule extra time around your deadlines. What if your thumbdrive or computer crashes? Keep multiple electronic copies of your work. Email it to yourself. Keep a current print copy. Save often. What if the mole hill starts looking like a Mount Everest again? Break the task into even smaller chunks.

In the end, the best action is take charge. An object in motion tends to stay in motion. Things might not work out according to what you planned, but when you’re in the driver’s seat, you can do something about it. The next best action? Experiment. Keep what works and lose what doesn’t.

**Get moving . . . Today.**

**Additional Resources**
Here are some additional resources on procrastination:

- **Design Your Own Anti-Procrastination Plan**
  This guide from the University of Texas provides several great suggestions for overcoming procrastination.

- **Anti-Procrastination Strategies**
  Looking for something more personal? This blog gives regularly updated strategies, tips, and memorable quotes to beat procrastination.

- **Procrastination: Ten Things To Know**
  Two of the world’s leading experts on procrastination offer the best kept secrets to avoiding it.

- **Procrastination - Study Skills Library**
  For more on the reasons we procrastinate and how to resolve them, check out this site from California Polytechnic State University.