



Getting Organised

Addressing procrastination

Procrastination is a complex process that affects everyone to varying degrees. Its effects can be devastating. Many able students fail to fulfil their potential as a result of procrastination. It is a myth that it is caused by laziness. The underlying processes that can contribute to procrastination include:

- unhelpful and unrealistically high ideals or perfectionism
- negative thinking and 'self-talk'
- fear of failure or of catastrophic consequences if mistakes are made
- low self-esteem, lack of assertiveness and/or an inability to say 'no'
- lack of interest in an activity, or feeling that you are on the wrong path

When we procrastinate, we try to avoid feeling bad by putting off what we know needs to be done. However, procrastination tends only to postpone or even intensify negative feelings in the longer term.

As a first step towards addressing procrastination, notice how you talk to yourself. Do you talk to yourself in the same way that you would talk to a friend? Are you kind to yourself? Do you put yourself under pressure? Try to notice when your 'self-talk' is overly negative and to take steps to change this.

Changing 'shoulds' to 'coulds' can help to reduce the influence of procrastination in your life. 'Shoulds' and 'have tos' are the language of blame and are unhelpful, whereas 'coulds' and 'choose tos' are the language of responsibility and action. For example:

I **should** have got the assignment done on time but I didn't. I am stupid and lazy. I **should** just give up.

I **could** have got the assignment done on time but I **chose** to spend my time on other things. I **could** do things differently next time.



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Here are some other strategies that may help you to address procrastination:

- Connect the task to your **lifetime aspirations and goals** to put it in perspective and remind yourself of why it needs to be done (see the **goal-setting activity** in ‘Study skills’ – part of the Getting organised section of the Academic Skills Hub).
- Use the **To-do list** template in ‘Semester planning’ – part of the Getting organised section of the Academic Skills Hub – to list everything that you need to do, prioritise your tasks, and set deadlines for completion. Writing things down clarifies our thoughts and opens them to scrutiny. Keep the list in your pocket or somewhere prominent to remind yourself of what you need to do.
- Some people decide to do the most difficult or unpleasant task first, or to alternate ‘nasty’ tasks with ‘nice’. Do the most difficult tasks when your energy is at its highest and choose a location and environment that is conducive to getting the task done. Plan a **reward** after doing a challenging task.
- Use the **task analysis** guide in the ‘Semester planning’ section of the Academic Skills Hub to break down longer and more difficult tasks into smaller sub-tasks, including some that can be completed in five minutes or less. Complete at least one five-minute task today.
- Try not to wait until you have a long stretch of ‘free’ time to get started. You can achieve a lot in 5, 10, 15, or 30 minutes. Decide that you won’t live another day with regret. Make a **start** – any start.
- Find **someone with a similar task**, or form/join a **study group**, to discuss and work on the task.
- If procrastination has become **chronic** and seems impossible to overcome, consider talking to a professional (such as a counsellor or GP) to get to the bottom of why this might be so.

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