Becoming More Productive: Workflow Strategies for Graduate Students in the Life and Health Sciences

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Workshop Notes

Make a To-Do List That Works for You
By Diya Das, PhD student in Molecular and Cell Biology

Why bother with a to-do list?
● Satisfaction of checking things off.
● Clarity with colleagues in written communication
● Setting reasonable expectations for yourself (and learning how to deliver)
● Quick and easy progress reports

Consider your needs when choosing how you will make and organize your to-do list. The following considerations were important to me:
● Scheduling: Something must be done each day.
● Flexibility: Research is unpredictable.
● Organization: Multi-project lists across research, personal, and extracurricular tasks.
● Quantitation: Discrete measures of progress to motivate and evaluate.

Recommended software for those considerations
● Todoist: project-based separation, quick views for projects and due dates
● Habitica: a gaming element for motivation, get points, be graded for habit formation
● Command line tool for syncing the two software: Todoist – HabitRPG sync

Choosing your system
● Do you prefer paper? Consider the paper planner with mind maps or the Bullet Journal system.
● Do you work best with your day scheduled to the minute?Coupled with your calendar, consider Toggl, Marinara (Pomodoro) Timer
● Are you motivated by big ideas that you want to make progress on? Complice, Beeminder
● Other apps: Wunderlist, Remember The Milk, WorkFlowy

Feeding the “Instant Gratification Monkey”
By Tara Benesch, M.D./M.S. student at the Joint Medical Program

The “Instant Gratification Monkey” sabotages our efforts to complete important tasks. We postpone difficult and important tasks in favor of easier and distracting activities. (This idea originally from Wait But Why.)

Here are 5 steps to managing the monkey.
Step 1. Feed the monkey.
- What activities give you life? (e.g., reading for fun, exercise, socializing)
- Categorize these activities along time frame: 2 min activities, 2 hour activities, 2-day activities and whether the activity is loud or quiet.
- Now you have rewarding activities you can complete in different settings (loud vs quiet) and time ranges.

Step 2. Plan for non-negotiables and “me time.”
- Treat activities that fuel you as non-negotiables.
- Schedule these activities, and include wind down time. Add them to your calendar and color code them so you have something to look forward to.
- Schedule chores like groceries and cooking.

Step 3. Trick the monkey.
- Turn chores into breaks from other tasks. Chores can be a way to turn off your brain.
- Schedule chores deliberately as brain/movement breaks from studying.
- Multi-task: call friends or family while commuting, watch a tv show during meal prep.
- Say no to:
  - Random events that derail you, even though your colleagues are attending.
  - Spending too much time on low-impact activities (e.g., spending more than 5 minutes formatting an unimportant document).
  - Meetings with no agenda.
  - Anything that replaces an activity you love with something that is draining.

Step 4: Stop planning and start doing.
- Getting started is the hardest part. Exercising willpower gives you more willpower.
- Limit your planning time to 10 min.

Step 5. Don’t let the monkey trick you.
- FOMO - don’t let yourself get swept up by activities that don’t make you feel fulfilled or bring you closer to your goals. There is always another happy hour to go to - but does it really make you happy, or feel more like an obligation?.
- Concern for others as an excuse to avoid your own important tasks: “I can’t do my pottery because I need to spend time with my significant other” will only lead you to resent your S.O. because they are keeping you from activities you enjoy.
- Questionable assumptions:
  - Arranging to fail (studying in bed)
  - Tomorrow loophole (I'll start tomorrow)
  - I deserve it loophole (I deserve this treat/break): Making sure that you have regularly scheduled time for activities that make you feel fulfilled will prevent you from feeling burnt out and like you deserve to go all-out and complete shut off productivity.

Helpful Sources
- [Better Than Before](https://www.gretchenrubin.com/) by Gretchen Rubin
- [The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business](https://www.chrushed.com/) by Charles Duhigg
- [Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work](https://www.chipheath.com/) by Chip Heath and Dan Heath
- [The Tim Ferriss Show](https://www.timferriss.com/) Podcast
• Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity by David Allen
• Wait But Why Blog

Strategies for Dealing with Challenges
By Heidi Wipf, PhD student in Plant and Microbial Biology

Build a support system.
• Take care of yourself. It sets you up for success, keeps your motivation high, and helps you balance your responsibilities and relationships.

Be aware of what depletes your energy.
• What overwhelms and tires you?
• Do you take on more than you can accomplish?
• What distracts you?
• What causes worry or anxiety?

Deal with distraction.
• Cultivate focus: meditate, journal, yoga, etc. Schedule these activities into your week.
• Strategize: When do you work best on what tasks? Schedule these tasks for accountability. Take short breaks.

Break out of the yes syndrome.
• Define short- and long-term goals. Focus on them.
• Reserve and schedule time for just yourself.

Address worry.
• Prioritize: Spend time where you need it. This serves as a reality check.
• Stop perfectionism.
• Build community: ask for feedback, talk about your struggles, and rely on campus resources like the Tang Center Counseling.

Know and hold on to your motivation.
• Keep your goals in sight. Try visual reminders like a vision board.
• Courage is the ultimate productivity hack.
• Fight inertia. Break tasks down into manageable to-do lists. Reward yourself.
• Keep track of your progress. DayGram is a one-line-a-day diary app.

Tips, Tools, and Inspiration for Being Your Best Self
By Vicky Gomez, DrPH student in Public Health

Learn to be okay with discomfort.
• Accept the challenges of original research and graduate life.
• Writing is challenging. See it as a behavior. Don’t overly focus on your feelings about writing.
Try the Pomodoro technique.
- This method for efficient task completion has three keys: set time limits, restrict distractions, and take breaks. Learn more.

Have organization systems.
- Record all upcoming assignments in a spreadsheet. This helps you know what’s next.
- Write down your goals to stay focused. Have big-picture semester goals that include school, work, and personal activities.
- Break your semester goals into small doable steps and plans. Build accountability mechanisms to help you focus (e.g., meetings with advisors, deadlines).
- Have a to-do list. Don’t forget to add personal and self-care tasks. Try a weekly to-do list in Evernote. Try the Things for Mac task manager.
- Invest in learning software that helps you organize.
- Find information quickly by organizing your computer files into folders. Also, sync files to the cloud with software like Dropbox.
- Try mind-mapping software like XMind. It helps organize your ideas and research literature.

Be healthy and balanced.
- Meditation helps.
- Make time for exercise.
- Schedule activities you look forward to.
- Spend time in the weekend for grocery shopping and meal prep. You’ll have healthy meals for the week which will increase your productivity.