The Productive Academic: Tips for Time Management

Most academics would like to be more productive, especially with their research. The causes for falling short include a heavy teaching load, service commitments and student advising. But many also don't manage their time well. Even when an instructor's teaching load and other departmental responsibilities are relatively light, a new challenge emerges: how to utilize the pockets of "free time" in the day and week. It is tempting to imagine that these pockets won't shrink and that various projects will spontaneously slide into them. That is usually an illusion. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, time almost always fills up, often with the wrong things. Preventing this requires making time management a priority.

Effective time management won't solve all your productivity problems, but it could solve many of them. Fortunately, it is a skill that can be learned by anyone willing to practice it. Here are some suggestions to help you do this more effectively.

Articulate your goals

It may seem obvious that articulating one's goals is a crucial first step, but few people do this. If you're not one of these few, set aside some time to think through your goals and *write them out*. To achieve clarity about your goals, nothing beats getting them out your head and putting them directly in front of you.

Start by just spitting out your goals – let them hit the page (or the screen) without ordering them. Free from the pressure to organize, your mind will relax, enabling you to cast as wide a net as possible.

Then organize them. Divide goals into personal and professional, and subdivide these into this semester and beyond, this week, and today. If you want to subdivide even more – for example, splitting professional goals (writing, teaching, etc.), adding categories (health, personal growth) or creating a monthly to-do list as well – feel free to do this, but the division mentioned above usually works as a convenient starting point.

Next, split your goals into tasks and projects. A task is a single action, e.g. make flight reservation for conference. A project is a series of actions with an overarching purpose, e.g. organize trip. What counts as a task or a project is subjective, however, because people differ about whether a given goal needs to be broken down into smaller steps. This difference reflects people's varying situations, knowledge, and experience, so there is no absolute rule. If you post class reading questions to Blackboard frequently, you might think of this as a task. If you've never used Blackboard before and aren't sure how to get started, posting questions there could be a project.

Since projects consist of tasks, the split between tasks and projects is ultimately a split between stand-alone tasks and project-support tasks. Consequently, the next move is to break down your projects into as many support tasks as you can think of and corral these under their respective project headings. If an item is a project, but you can't think of any support tasks right now, just let it be – you can break it down later. Projects on your daily to-do list are exceptions, however. This list should be implementation-ready and thus be boiled down to tasks – some stand-alone, some project-support.

The Calendar

Put tasks and appointments that you need to schedule in advance on your calendar. This should include both recurrent and non-recurrent stuff. Don't put your daily list on your calendar. First, it clutters up your calendar, making important scheduled appointments hard to see. Second, you'll probably modify your daily list many times, adding items here and crossing off items there as the day unfolds. Although online calendars won't be the worse for wear, paper calendars will start looking like a war zone, making scheduled appointments difficult to locate.

Put your calendar commitments on your daily list. This will enable you to see, in a single view, everything that needs to be done that day. Arrange your daily list in roughly chronological order. You don't have to assign a specific time for each – that's usually impossible – but it's helpful to have a general idea of what you're going to do when.

The Mechanics of the Daily Review

In *Getting Things Done*, David Allen calls the time you spend making your daily to-do list 'the daily review.' It usually takes only 10 to 15 minutes, but you do have to make it a regular habit. Let's assume that having already implemented your first daily list, you're sitting down to create your next one. This should be a *new* list – not a continuation of your previous list with completed items crossed off and new items added. Creating a new list reduces clutter, making it easier to focus.

What's the next step?

First, decide which incomplete tasks – if there are any – from your previous daily list you wish to include on your new list. Second, you probably jot down additional tasks or projects as they occur to you, or are assigned to you, during the day. If you plan to complete them that day, but not right away, add them to *that* day's daily list as soon as you can, cashing out projects into support tasks. Otherwise, keep a separate list for these called "unsorted." (If your daily list is on a sheet of paper, keeping the unsorted list on the backside works well.) During your daily review, scan your unsorted list to see if any items are ripe for your new daily list. Third, consult your weekly list for anything that needs to be done today. On the daily list it goes. Fourth, look over the remaining unsorted tasks and add them to your weekly, monthly, or semester-plus lists to review later. Lastly, ask yourself if there's anything that you haven't thought of or anything that you forgot.

Pick a certain time of day to conduct your daily review and to stick to it. What time works best? That depends on you and your schedule, but there are a few things to consider. If you're a morning person, conducting your daily review before you leave for work or just after you arrive may be the obvious choice. Doing it in the evening (or afternoon) before does have some advantages, however. You get time to sleep on your daily list and think of things you overlooked. Also, because there's no pressure to complete the daily review immediately, your mind can wander more freely, which fosters a more creative search. Finally, it's nice to wake up to a completed daily list – you can look it over quickly, add anything that's missing, and hit the ground running. You don't have to spend extra energy fending off the usual distractions of a busy morning. On the other hand, many people don't have the energy to conduct their daily review right after work or in the evening – they're just too drained. And the absence of pressure to complete it in time for work can open the door to procrastination. You might experiment a little before settling on an approach that works best for you.

Do a weekly review as well. This enables you to step back and consider your goals for the week, and it makes your daily list more strategic and easier to compose. During your weekly review, follow the procedure for the daily review, but consult your monthly list as well. And then do a monthly and a semester-plus review, following the same procedure used in the daily and weekly reviews. This will ensure that your long-term perspective still makes sense and that it's supported by your short- and medium-term goals.

Make sure that your lists are organized and accessible. Using a task management app on your smartphone is one solution – Todoist, Any.do, and Remember The Milk are popular. If you're not using an app, give your lists a home, such as a notebook or folder. You may not need to carry around your weekly, monthly, and semester lists, but your daily list should be within reach wherever you go. Sometimes just taking a picture of it with your smartphone will work.

Good Enough

I've presented one version of a task/time-management system. Modify it to suit your style and purposes. Naturally, you'll probably be adding items to your calendar throughout the day, not just during the daily review. You might also be regularly bypassing the daily review to add actions to your weekly, monthly, and semester lists. The point of the reviews is not to put you in a straightjacket, but to enable you to collect yourself and focus. Since most people need to set aside time for this, it's best for them to make it routine.

No system is perfect for everyone and everyone abandons her system from time to time. There will be days when you're unable to complete your daily list or even to make much progress on it. Occasionally you might have to toss the whole list due to unexpected occurrences. All of that is normal. Nevertheless, if you rarely make much headway on your daily or weekly lists, it's time to take a hard look at what's impeding you – impulsiveness, lack of focus, unrealistic expectations, or something else. Until you address these underlying obstacles, no time management system will work.