

# A GUIDE TO AVOIDING PROCRASTINATION



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## PROCRASTINATION

### *Procrastination is the thief of time. Anon*

Procrastination is a complex psychological behavior that affects everyone to some degree or another. With some it can be a minor problem; with others it is a source of considerable stress and anxiety. Procrastination is only remotely related to time management (procrastinators often know exactly what they should be doing, even if they do not do it), which is why very detailed schedules usually are no help.

Procrastination is an excuse used to cope with multiple demands and pressures. Students must recognize the consequences of continually choosing to leave tasks to the last possible minute.

### **Characteristics**

Procrastinators are often remarkably optimistic about their ability to complete a task on a tight deadline; this is usually accompanied by reinforcing the false belief that everything is under control. (Therefore, there is no need to start.) For example, procrastinators may estimate that a paper will take only five days to write; they have fifteen days; there is plenty of time; no need to start. Procrastinators are lulled by a false sense of security as time passes. At some point, they cross over an imaginary starting time and suddenly realize, “Oh no! — I am not in control! There isn’t enough time!”

At this point, considerable effort is directed towards completing the task, and work progresses. This sudden spurt of energy is the source of the erroneous feeling that “I only work well under pressure.” Actually, any progress made is luck. There is no other choice. There are no alternatives. Progress is being made, but the procrastinator has lost his/her freedom.

Barely completed in time, the paper may actually earn a fairly good grade; whereupon the student experiences mixed feelings: pride of accomplishment (sort of), scorn for the professor who cannot recognize substandard work, and guilt for getting an underserved grade. But the net result is reinforcement: procrastinators are rewarded positively for their poor behavior. (“Look what a decent grade I got after all!”) As a result, the counterproductive behavior is repeated over and over again.

Positive reinforcement (a good grade) for delay is a principal contributor to continued procrastination.

## **Other Characteristics**

- **Low Self-Confidence** — Procrastinators may struggle with feelings of low self-confidence and low self-esteem. They may insist upon a high level of performance even though they may feel inadequate or incapable of actually achieving that level.
- **I'm Too Busy** — Procrastinators may call attention to how busy they are. "Obviously I cannot do such and such because my affairs are so complicated and so demanding. That is why I am late, etc." Procrastinators may even spend considerable time justifying their reasons, time that could be spent doing the work.
- **Stubbornness** — Procrastination may be used as an expression of stubbornness or pride: "Don't think you can push me around. I will do it when I'm good and ready."
- **Manipulation** — Procrastination may be used to control or manipulate the behavior of others. "They cannot start if I am not there." Let's face it: deliberate delay drives others crazy.
- **Coping With Pressures** — Procrastination is often truly difficult to eradicate since the delay behavior has become a method of coping with day-to-day pressures and experiences. Obviously if one of these is cured, others will put new demands and expectations upon a student. It's easier to have an excuse, to delay, to put off.
- **A Frustrated Victim** — Procrastinators often feel like victims: they cannot understand their behavior or why they cannot get work done like others. The whole thing is a frustrating mystery. The reasons for their behavior are hidden from them.

## **Four Simple Reasons for Procrastination**

1. Difficult — the task seems hard to do; we naturally tend to avoid difficult things in favor of those which seem easy to us.
2. Time-consuming — the task will take large blocks of time, and large blocks of time are unavailable until the weekend.
3. Lack of knowledge or skills — no one wants to make mistakes, so wait until you learn how before you start.
4. Fears — everyone will know how you screwed up.

## **Benefits of Overcoming Procrastination**

What are the benefits of overcoming procrastination? Peace of mind, a feeling of strength and purpose, and a healthy feeling of being in charge of your life. While procrastination makes you feel weak, useless, and helpless, taking charge of your life will make you feel strong, competent, and capable. You will experience increased personal freedom.

The simple cure? Do everything opposite of what you typically do.

- Tell yourself: this isn't so hard, it won't take long, I am sure that I know how to do it, I can learn while I'm doing this.
- Tell yourself: "I'm only going to work on this for five minutes. It's an hour job, but I'm only giving it five minutes." Often when you get into the task you spend more than five minutes. Before you know it, the task is completed.

## **Four Complex Reasons for Procrastination**

**1. Perfectionism** — unrealistically high expectations or standards. Everything must go completely right. The perfectionist is long on self-criticism and short on self-praise.

- Perfectionism creates a high degree of dissatisfaction and frustration because seldom is anything accomplished that is completely acceptable the very first time. The perfectionist nitpicks it to death.
- Perfectionists may delay in starting a project because they feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of energy it will take to criticize or nitpick something, and they fear all the frustration it will generate in the process.
- The words "should," "ought," "must," have to occur frequently in the procrastinator's conversation. (I should get straight A's; I must do everything right the first time, etc.) "If you can't do it right, don't do it at all."
- The desire to have everything absolutely perfect may mask problems of self-esteem and self-confidence.

*How to resolve.*

- Try to assure yourself that this effort or version will be good enough.

- Make an effort to praise what you have done.
- It's impossible to eradicate all mistakes.
- You have undoubtedly found all the fatal errors by now.
- Remind yourself that great writers, poets, and artists at one time or another completed their work; therefore, it will be okay to say that yours is done also.

**2. Anger/Hostility** — if we are unhappy with someone, we'll often withhold our best efforts. For example, if you are upset with a professor, you are likely to delay in starting a demanding project as a way of "getting even." But you are the one who loses; you are the one who will get the low grade.

*How to resolve.* Determine that you are the one who is feeling upset and see how your actions will actually harm you in the long run. Letting anger stand in the way of personal success is not productive.

**3. Low Frustration Tolerance** — circumstances overwhelm you easily; you find situations radically intolerable and terribly unfair. Frustration is characterized by whining and complaining, with such phrases as "it isn't fair," "this is too hard," and "no one else has to." Feeling the way you do, it seems reasonable to "put it off" until you feel better about doing the work. The trouble is you feel just as frustrated the next day.

*How to resolve.* The more you want something and can't have it, the greater your level of frustration.

- Get help from someone who can show you how to solve the problem.
- Learn how to temporarily postpone your desires. Most of the time, you will eventually get what you want.

**4. Self-Downing** — this happens when you continually minimize your own skills and abilities and express doubt in your ability to succeed. People who habitually put themselves down tend to disbelieve themselves even when they are successful: it was "just dumb luck." In addition, they may also find it hard to accept praise and compliments for work performed. ("Wow, you did so well on the exam!" "Oh, I just lucked out; I really didn't know it all that well.")

The trouble is that, given a long enough time, self-downers will actually come to believe that they are incapable of certain levels of achievement. Self-downing results in procrastination because the person who is uncomfortable with success will seek ways to become less successful and less visible. Turn in that important quarterly report late, and soon success will fade. (“Why did they fire you?” “I told them all along I couldn’t sustain the pace, and see! I was right. I can’t work at that level.”)

*How to resolve.*

- Practice accepting compliments about your work performance by simply saying “Thank you.”
- Figure out why you feel uncomfortable with success. Did significant others in your life often make you feel that way? Were you taught to minimize your success? Why is success so scary? Will it make you stand out in the crowd? Do you feel as though others will not accept you if you are successful?
- Remember to compliment and praise yourself for work accomplished.

### **The Inner Workings of Procrastination**

*A = Activating Event.* The activating event is whatever you are putting off, such as studying for tests or writing a paper.

*B = Belief System.* These are your “hidden” feelings about the task; your feelings govern your motivation. If you have negative feelings, you will tend to put off or delay. These feelings control your response.

*C = Consequence.* This is what we actually do. There are two approaches: rational and irrational. A rational response is, “I don’t like writing papers at all, but I had better get going on it anyway.” An irrational approach is, “I hate writing papers, and even though it’s due next week, I’ll start it later.”

The fact is, all tasks are really neutral. Examine your belief system; understand why you dislike the task. Then change your way of thinking.

### **Steps to the Cure**

- Realize you are delaying something unnecessarily.
- Discover the real reasons for your delay. List them.
- Dispute those real reasons and overcome them. Be vigorous.
- At least begin the task.

**Practice What You've Learned**

- Think of one thing you are currently procrastinating about, and write it on the line below. It might be personal, school or work- related.
- Now write all the reasons for your delay. This may take five or ten minutes because some of them are really hidden from you. These reasons are the controlling influences. Write down as many as possible.
- In the “Arguments Against Delay” column, argue against all the reasons for delay in a convincing manner. If you can argue against them successfully, you will be able to start the task.

I'm delaying on \_\_\_\_\_ because

Reasons for Delay

Arguments Against Delay

1.	_____	_____
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____
	_____	_____
	_____	_____

## **Some Tools That Will Help**

- Make the tasks look small and easy in your mind. (“I’ve written lots of excellent papers; this is just one more paper.”)
- Do only a small part of the task each time. (“I’ll just check out the books tonight. Later on I’ll glance through them.”)
- Five-minute plan: Work on something for just five minutes. At the end of five minutes, switch to something else if you want. Chances are, you’ll get involved enough to keep going.
- Advertise your plans to accomplish something, and let peer pressure push you forward. (“I told everyone that I was going to finish this tonight.”)
- Use a good friend as a positive role model. If you have trouble concentrating, study in the presence of someone who doesn’t.
- Modify your environment — if you can’t study at home, find a place where you can study; or, change your study situation at home. In any case, set aside a space, a chair to be used only for study. Don’t use the same chair you use for watching TV or eating your dinner.
- Plan tomorrow and establish priorities — some students find that simply writing down reasonable starting and stopping times helps them get going.
- Expect some backsliding. Don’t expect to be perfect even when you’re trying to get rid of perfectionism! Occasionally, your plans will not work. Accept setbacks and start again.

## **An Insight**

Procrastination is reinforcing — every time you delay, it reinforces your negative attitude toward that task. Every time you put off something you dislike, you:

- strengthen the habit of not doing
- practice avoidance instead of participation
- avoid acquiring training and skills
- fill yourself with fears.

Active participation in anything tends to give you a positive attitude toward that activity; inactivity develops an unfavorable attitude. In other

words, the reason you dislike calculus is because it's hanging over your head, worrying you. Since you haven't acquired skills in it, you can't do the assignments, so why try? Also, there's a test coming up soon, and you **MUST** do well on it — except you know you can't. Suddenly everything seems terribly unfair (class is too hard), and you become angry towards the teacher (he/she goes too fast, or he/she seems indifferent to my struggles.) The truth is, the sooner you get involved in your studies, the better you will feel.

### **Common Impediments to Overcoming Procrastination**

Procrastination is relatively hard to overcome since you can delude yourself about it so easily. The following is a list of things we often tell ourselves:

- Mañana — “I’ll do it tomorrow.”
- Contingent mañana — “I’ll do it tomorrow, if…”
- Grasshopperism — “I need to have some well-earned fun first.” (in Aesop’s fable, the grasshopper fiddled and played all summer while the ants stored up winter supplies. When winter came, the grasshopper suffered.)
- Escapism — “I’ve got to get out for awhile to clear my mind.”
- Impulsiveness — “My problem will be solved if I change my major, or attend a different college, or…”
- Music and reading — “I’ll relax awhile and then get started.”
- Cavalry to the Rescue — “The professor will get sick and cancel finals!”

### **Common Rationalizations**

Each of these rationalizations needs to be argued against and defeated so that you can experience success. Write a rebuttal for each one.

- “I’m more productive when I work under pressure, so I’m postponing all my work until the pressure builds up and then I’ll get it done easily.”
- “I don’t know how to do this problem, so I’m waiting until I know how before I do it.”
- “This task isn’t getting done because I really don’t want to do it. And that’s the honest truth.”

- “Relax. The world isn’t going to come to an end if this doesn’t get done.”
- “This job is easier to do when I’m in the mood, and I’m simply not in the mood right now.”
- “I waited until the last moment before and it worked out okay, so why not this time?”
- “If I wait until the last minute, I won’t spend so much time on it.”
- “If I do this work right now, I’ll miss out on an once-in-a-lifetime social event.”
- “Circumstances beyond my control prevented me from doing so.”
- “I’ve worked on this for so long that I have no interest or energy for it.”

### **Finally**

Now that you understand how procrastination works, and how you can greatly reduce its influence in your life, you’ll experience more freedom and greater personal self-satisfaction.

Keep working on it. You may still procrastinate, but now you’ll be able to resolve the situation much more quickly which in turn will enhance your feelings of self-confidence. When you do succeed, take time to savor the moment so you will remember how good it feels. This will help the next time you need encouragement.

Treat the discovery process like a game, and have some fun with yourself

## PROCRASTINATION QUOTIENT

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Mildly Agree</b>	<b>Mildly Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
1. I usually find reasons for not acting immediately on a difficult assignment.				
2. I know what I have to do but frequently find that I have done something else.				
3. I carry my books/work assignments with me to various places but do not open them.				
4. I work best at the “last minute” when the pressure is really on.				
5. There are too many interruptions that interfere with my accomplishing my top priorities.				
6. I avoid forthright answers when pressed for an unpleasant or difficult action.				
7. I take half measures which will avoid or delay unpleasant or difficult action.				
8. I have been too tired, nervous or upset to do the difficult task that faces me.				
9. I like to get my room in a good order before starting a difficult task.				
10. I find myself waiting for inspirations before becoming involved on most important study/work tasks.				
<b>Total Response</b>				
<b>Weight</b>	<b>X4</b>	<b>X3</b>	<b>X2</b>	<b>X1</b>
<b>Score</b>				

Multiply the Total Response row by the corresponding Weight to get the Score for each column. Add up the Score row to determine your total score. That number is your Procrastination Quotient.

Procrastination Quotient:

- Below 20 – Occasional Procrastinator
- 21 -30 – Chronic Procrastinator
- Above 30 – Severe Procrastinator

This chart and rating system were developed by H.E.Flory of the University of Alabama Counseling Center. Updated: March 6, 2002, UT Austin Learning Center.

The material used in the making of this guide is adapted from:

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- [sas.calpoly.edu/asc/ssllprocrastination.html](http://sas.calpoly.edu/asc/ssllprocrastination.html)
- [www.utexas.edu/student/utlc/makinggrade/pquotient.html](http://www.utexas.edu/student/utlc/makinggrade/pquotient.html)