

Stop Procrastination – Find its Source

When it comes to changing a behavior, nothing works unless it addresses the reason you do that behavior. There are a number of different reasons students procrastinate on schoolwork – figuring out why you procrastinate can help you stop the behavior at its root.

What kind of procrastinator are you?

The “I’d Really Rather Not.”

“I’d Really Rather Not”-type procrastinators know they have something due, and they know they should do it, but they really don’t want to do it, so they put it off.

Sometimes just thinking about the assignment makes you feel frustrated, or anxious, so you shove it out of your mind. Sometimes you go to start it, realize it’s miserable, and find something else to do. This situation can often be compounded (made worse) when you start to feel even worse about putting it off – now you feel ashamed for being so late, or angry because it means more work in less time – and when you feel worse about it, you have even less motivation to get started.

How to fix it: This one isn’t about time management, it’s about emotional awareness. You can’t get started on a project if thinking about starting it makes you feel scared, frustrated, angry, or ashamed.

First, figure out what, exactly, you’re feeling. Try checking this chart – or, do some short “mindful awareness” thinking or journaling to get to the root of your procrastination:

Feeling	Root	Solution
Anger	You’re angry at your teacher for giving such a miserable assignment, angry at your parents for getting on your case about it, or angry about circumstances that make it hard for you to do it.	Let yourself be angry – sometimes things aren’t fair, and that feels awful. Then, take a deep breath and realize that you still need to get it done, no matter how angry it makes you. Try to channel your anger into a more productive feeling – kick that assignment’s butt! Push through unfair circumstances by being tough and awesome! Hi-yah!
Frustration	The assignment is hard, and you don’t understand it. It will take more work than you want to put in, and you risk being wrong or failing, which never feels good.	Ask for help. Email your teacher with a question or request for an extension, call a friend in the same class, or re-check your textbook and notes. Find a part of the assignment you can do, and start there. Realize that it’s better to try your best and turn in something than give up and take a O.
Fear	You don’t want to try your hardest and then fail. You don’t want to let people down or get in trouble.	Know that perfection is unattainable. Remember that your best is always good enough and value the courage it takes to get started.
Guilt/shame	Now, you’ve put it off for so long that you’ve made an even bigger mess. You worry about getting in trouble or letting people down. You’re angry at yourself for not doing what you needed to do.	Let go of the past and focus on the present – you can’t undo the procrastination, but you can stop it right here and now. Try thinking about how good it will feel to have this assignment done and out of the way. Find a private spot to work on it if you’re worried about someone getting on your case.
Irritation	There’s no deep emotional issue – you just really, really, don’t feel like doing this unpleasant thing.	Get off your butt and do it. Channel a personal hero of yours who pushed through miserable tasks or situations because of a greater good. Remember that self-discipline is worth cultivating!

The “I Had No Idea!”

Maybe this has happened to you: You walk into class one day, and everyone’s turning in the big essay that was due. You had no idea it was due that day – if you’d known, you totally would have done it! You remember your teacher mentioning it, but each time she did, it was so far off that you knew you had tons of time. Now you have no idea where all that time went.

Or maybe this is what happens: You get home after a long day of school. Your homework is written in your agenda and tucked neatly in your backpack, and you plan on starting it all just as soon as you finish your after-school snack. While you eat your snack, you get on the internet to check your favorite websites – just real quick. The next thing you know, it’s late at night, you’re tired, and your homework still isn’t done. You never planned to wait this long, but now it’s too late to finish.

It can feel so frustrating and powerless to have time disappear on you like that. You never meant to put things off – you just lost track of time or forgot about an assignment. “I Had No Idea” procrastination really comes down to time management and task management.

How to fix it: Stay aware of your time and your schedule. Use the “Stickler Schedule” handout and/or the “Timer Method” handout to make a schedule for yourself, then **STICK TO IT**. It takes discipline and willpower to make yourself get up from what you’re doing and start your homework right away, but every time you do it, it gets easier for the next time.

Some people just don’t have a strong internal clock, and don’t really “feel” or notice the hours slipping away. If that’s you, **SET A TIMER** for each section of your schedule, and **OBEY THE TIMER**. It’s easy to think that you have plenty of time in the beginning of the evening – but “plenty of time” at 6:00 soon turns into “enough time” at 7:00 which turns into “I should start soon” at 8:00 which becomes “it’s too late” at 9:00. Write this on your binder or over your desk: **OBEY THE TIMER**.

If your problem is forgetting about assignments entirely or losing track of your schedule in the “big picture,” talk to a teacher, counselor, or a parent about finding a system for keeping track of assignments that works for you. Look at the “Task Management” handout as well.

The “I Work Better Under Pressure.”

“I work better under pressure” is a lie procrastinators tell themselves to excuse or explain procrastination. Sure, it may be true that you’re capable of getting things done last-minute, and it may even be true that your last-minute work earns good grades – but cramming and rushing to get things done isn’t the best way to work. It prevents you from having enough time to get help, change your topic, or do research. It makes for miserable and high-stress periods of time, even all-nighters. If you let this habit continue, it will prevent you from having fun with your friends and building good relationships with your professors in college.

Try one of these more honest phrases to see where the root of your procrastination is – and then look at how to fix it.

“I’m proud of my ability to cram.”

For some reason, procrastination and then last-minute cramming have almost become status symbols among students. You’ll hear people bragging about how long they put off an assignment, or one-upping each other about who stayed up later doing homework. When you look closely, though, it’s nothing to be proud of. All-nighters are unpleasant and stressful, and a culture that puts them on a pedestal is not a healthy culture. Irresponsibility isn’t cool, and staying up later than anyone else doesn’t make you tougher, smarter, or a better student. Drop the act and let go of the idea that doing your homework on a healthy timeline is somehow not impressive.

“I don’t have the self-discipline to get things done without a looming deadline.”

For some people, procrastinating is a replacement for real self-discipline. You don’t want to do your work, but you also don’t want to fail, so you sit back and let those two desires fight it out until the desperate panic about failing kicks you into gear. But using panicky, last-minute pressure as a motivator isn’t healthy – it increases your stress levels and leaves you less time to do good work. It also prevents you from learning everything you’re supposed to get out of assignments, and keeps you from feeling proud of and invested in your work.

Wouldn’t it be better if you could find willpower, motivation, and discipline in yourself instead of forcing yourself into a situation where they’re based on external pressures? Use the Time Management handout to make a plan for getting things done, then pay attention to the pride and comfort that come from knowing you can get things done when you want, how you want, on your own strength.

“I get fine grades on my last-minute work.”

It can be hard to change a behavior if you’re perfectly fine with the outcome you’re currently getting from that behavior. And if you think school is all about grades, then from your perspective, everything is fine!

But school *isn’t* all about grades. It’s about learning new, interesting, and important things – and learning can’t happen if you’re rushing to get through an assignment. It’s about finding who you are and becoming the person you want to be – and no one wants to be stressed all the time and lack self-discipline. And it’s about enjoying being a teenager – which you can’t do if you’re constantly battling stress, all-nighters, pressure from adults, and other consequences of procrastination.

Changing behavior can mean changing priorities – if your grades are the most important, then you won’t feel compelled to change any behavior that doesn’t hurt your grades. But if you prioritize your health and your learning, you’ll see that procrastinating doesn’t support those priorities.

The “You Can’t Make Me.”

Here’s a true story. When I was a teenager, I had a hard time keeping my room neat. But I absolutely hated having a messy room. Many days, I would ride home on the bus, thinking about how I wanted to get my room clean that evening. I’d plan out what I was going to do and get pretty psyched up to have a clean room. Then, as soon as I walked in the door, my mother would greet me with something like “You need to get your room cleaned up tonight.”

As soon as she said that, all the drive and excitement I’d worked up on the bus completely dissolved. I didn’t want to clean my room anymore. I hated the very thought of cleaning my room. And I’d get angry about it. Lots of fights started when I tried to make my mom understand that if she’d just leave me alone about something, I’d get it done on my own timeline, but the more she pushed me, the more I just wanted to push back.

The result? I was angry and frustrated – plus my room was still messy, which drove me crazy.

We like to have control over our environments, and we hate to be told what to do. It’s a fact of human nature. It can be really confusing and frustrating to see all our willpower dissolve when someone else tries to make us do something, even if we would have gotten it done on our own.

How to fix it: This is a tough one for anyone still living with their parents, but there are a few ways to feel like you’re more in control of your schedule.

One: Share your needs. If you recognize yourself as a “You Can’t Make Me” procrastinator, talk to your parents and teachers about this emotional roadblock (bring this packet). Ask for their support and work out a system that takes some pressure off you. Be realistic – they’ll still need to be involved in your education, but maybe you can decide that no one mentions homework to you until a certain time at night, or try a “trial week” where you’re on your own. You may be surprised at how the desire to prove yourself and take control motivates you to get things done.

Two: Make a schedule. If you work out a Stickler Schedule for yourself, and agree to stick to it, you can have a lot more autonomy in your work time. Make a Stickler Schedule, then set the timer - if you obey the timer, you won’t need reminders from other people. Go over the schedule with your parents and establish some guidelines for when they should step in if you ignore the timer.

Three: Change your mindset. Maybe you don’t like your teacher. Maybe you don’t like the demands your parents are putting on you. Rebelling against something can feel good at the time, but it really gives the other person more power over you – which is exactly what you’re trying to avoid. If you base your actions and choices on what another person wants, even if it’s doing the opposite of what they want, they’re still influencing you more than your own desires.

Figure out what you want from school and from life. Set your goals and work to meet them – even if they align with what other people want from you, now they’re really yours. Take ownership of your grades so that the most important force acting on you is your own desires, not the pressure coming from other people. Resistance and rebellion are reactions, not actions. Take action.

Time Management Methods

Here are two tried-and-true ways to get your time management and scheduling on track. Both of them involve serious record-keeping, at least for a short time. This will help you figure out how long it takes you to do everything, and what challenges you face when it comes to distractions and procrastination. Once you know this, you can budget your time more effectively, and you can go to your teachers, coaches, and parents armed with the information they need to help you reduce your workload.

Time Management Method One: The Schedule Stickler

Here's how the method works:

1. You make a schedule, and you **STICK TO IT**. At the beginning of every day or week, you figure out how much time you have, and you "budget" it to include all the things you want to get done.
2. Make sure you include **EVERYTHING** – including relaxing and eating time.
3. During the time chunks you've set out, you **ONLY** do the things you've schedule.
4. Don't fudge the schedule times. If it says go for a walk at 7:00, walk out the door at 7:00. Don't wait until 7:01!

This method's biggest weakness is also its biggest strength – it leaves zero room for flexibility. Make yourself stick to it, and you will get your time management on track. It's a short-term, intense solution: after a few weeks on the Stickler Schedule, you may be able to relax your schedule while maintaining the ability to budget your time.

At the end of each schedule block, make a note of how much you got done, what you have left to do, and how you felt about it so you can get a more realistic picture of your time management needs.

This packet includes a sample schedule for a student, plus some blank sheets to try this method for yourself.

TIME SLOT	TASK	NOTES
4:00-4:30	Driving home in car – relax and check my phone	My little brother was bothering me – I will remember to put headphones in my backpack for tomorrow!
4:30-5:00	Just home from school – eat a snack and watch an episode of Parks and Recreation on my computer	It was really hard not to watch another episode at 5:00 and start my math homework instead. Maybe I should schedule longer times to watch TV.
5:00-6:00	Work on math homework	I finished by 6:00 but did not have time to check my work.
6:00-7:00	Dinner with my family	Mom and Dad suggested that I study flashcards at dinner but I told them I was sticking to my schedule. I took the time to talk to my little brother now that I was more relaxed.
7:00-7:15	Study my French flashcards	I feel like I really know this vocab but I studied for 15 minutes anyway.
7:15-7:45	Do History reading and notes	I was unable to finish in 30 minutes so I did my best and emailed my teacher when I finished letting him know I am overwhelmed with the homework.
7:45-8:15	English worksheet on connotation and denotation	I had a very hard time staying focused and kept stopping to check my phone so I felt rushed at the end to finish.
8:15-8:45	Study for Chemistry test	I did not understand molar mass so I emailed my teacher a specific question and skipped that concept. I will check with her tomorrow if I don't get a reply.
8:45-9:15	Do Biology homework	This was a worksheet on the energy cycle and it was very easy – I understand this well.
9:15-10:00	Relaxing computer and phone time	I couldn't stop stressing about my unfinished history work so I got it back out and worked for a little bit. Then at 9:30 I put it away and hung out online.
10:00-10:30	Bedtime routine – set out clothes and make lunch for next day, read some manga before bed (put headphones in backpack!)	I wish we had more string cheese for my lunch. I asked my mom to put it on the shopping list.
10:30	Go to bed	My mom came in to talk to me before bed so I ended up staying awake until after 11. I will talk to my parents about helping me stick to my schedule and I will make a note of how tired I feel tomorrow.

Time Management Method Two: The Timer Technique

The Timer Technique is a time management system that many successful people swear by. All you need is a timer (you can use your watch, your phone, a kitchen timer, a stopwatch, whatever) and an eensy bit of self-discipline.

This works for two main reasons. One: because it allows you to do solid, uninterrupted work and manage your distractions, which is far more productive than multi-tasking or sort-of working. Two: because it allows you to take guilt-free breaks that are solid, real breaks, rather than sort-of breaks where you're still kind of working or feeling stressed because you should be working.

Research has shown that the brain HATES multi-tasking – the more you can reduce your multi-tasking, the happier you'll feel and the better your work will be. Cut down on texting while reading, doing math homework in front of the TV, and studying flashcards while you pretend to relax. Make work time work and rest time rest. You'll feel great!

Spend your working time totally committed to working, and spend your resting time totally committed to relaxing. As it turns out, both working **and** relaxing are much healthier and more effective when you're fully committed to them!

HOW IT WORKS:

1. CHOOSE A TASK:

It doesn't matter what the task is: this could be doing your homework, cleaning your room, putting your clothes and snacks together for the next morning, etc.

2. SET THE TIMER:

Think about how much serious, uninterrupted time you can spend on this task at once. Most people use stretches of 20-30 minutes. Make sure it's enough to get real work done, but not so long that you'll burn out. Promise to spend that time on that task without doing **anything** else. That includes checking your phone, getting up for a snack, and anything else!

3. COMMIT TO THE TASK:

Don't do anything but focus entirely on the thing you're doing. Sink yourself into the task. If you think of something else you need to do, write it down, but don't start doing it.

4. WHEN THE TIMER RINGS, MAKE A RECORD

Write down how long you worked, and on what. You may also want to make a note of how much you got done, how distracted you felt, and anything else you want to keep track of.

5. TAKE A SHORT BREAK

Set the timer for 5-10 minutes – decide for yourself how long of a break you need. During this break, don't feel guilty or stressed for not working. Make it a real, honest, relaxing break!

6. TAKE LONGER BREAKS

After completing three or four sessions with long work stretches and short breaks, set the timer for 20-30 minutes and take a more solid break. Watch a TV show, play a game, read, or spend time with others.

Task Management: make your to-do list work for you!

So you're all ready to make a schedule or pick a task to set a timer for – but what should you put on the schedule? How do you decide what tasks to set a timer for? Long, extensive to-do lists can be really overwhelming, and it's easy to forget important things if your to-do list relies on your memory or a disorganized system.

Things that can help:

- **Keep a to-do list in a central location.** Get a planner, agenda, calendar, or notebook to keep track of all your homework, chores, and other tasks. Keep it with you, update it as soon as you find out about a new task, and keep it clearly organized.
- **Sort your list into categories.** Instead of one long list, make separate lists based on type of tasks, where the tasks need to get done, etc.
- **Make a Daily Top 5.** Everything on your to-do list doesn't need to get done that day. Set five major goals for each day, then add other "do soon" tasks underneath.
- **Break tasks into smaller tasks.** Writing down huge tasks can be overwhelming – break it down into smaller things that are easier to get started and quicker to get done.

Here's an example of how to make an impossible-seeming to-do list more manageable:

TO DO TODAY:

- History homework
- Chemistry homework
- English homework
- Study for French
- Make lunch for tomorrow
- Do laundry
- Email my teachers about student hours
- Clean my room
- Plan surprise b-day party for Alex
- Practice piano
- Make weekend plans with Christie
- Get permission slip signed
- Organize my English binder
- Clean hamster cage
- Email pen-pal back

That's a ton of stuff to get done in one afternoon! First, let's sort the tasks into categories:

HOMEWORK	PERSONAL	SOCIAL
History homework	Make lunch tomorrow	Make weekend plans with Christie
Chemistry homework	Do my laundry	Email my pen-pal back
English homework	Clean my room	Plan surprise b-day party for Alex
French studying	Practice piano	
Get permission slip signed	Clean hamster cage	
Email teachers		
Organize English binder		

Okay. Now we have a better handle on the types of tasks we need to take care of. But they all still seem pretty daunting. Let's break them down into more manageable tasks:

HOMEWORK	PERSONAL	SOCIAL
History homework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read chapter 13 • Take notes on Chap 13 	Make lunch for tomorrow <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slice up cheese for sandwich • Clean Tupperware • Pack snack bags 	Make weekend plans with Christie <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google concerts happening nearby • Text Christie • Ask Mom for ride
Chemistry homework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do ion worksheet • Study for ion quiz 	Do my laundry <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sort • Wash & dry • Fold & put away 	Email my pen-pal back
English homework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pronoun worksheet 	Clean my room <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wash sheets and make bed • Clear off homework desk • Organize nail polish • Take out trash 	Plan surprise party for Alex <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make secret Facebook group for invites • Find restaurant and make reservations • Text Alex inviting her to fake event that day
French studying <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flashcards on food vocab • Review verb rules 	Practice piano <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scales • Competition piece 	
Get permission slip signed	Clean hamster cage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wash • Dry & reassemble 	
Email teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English teacher – homework load • Chem teacher – set up a meeting • History teacher – send him cool history video I found 		
Organize English binder <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put papers in correct places • Find my syllabus 		

Now that we've broken things down, we've identified a lot of tasks that only take a few minutes to complete! If we knock those out first, then we feel accomplished when we clear a lot of things off our list before we jump into the bigger things. Here's what the list looks like after we spend 30 minutes taking away the clutter of tasks we can do in less than 5 minutes:

HOMEWORK	PERSONAL	SOCIAL
History homework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read chapter 13 • Take notes on Chap 13 	Make lunch for tomorrow <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slice up cheese for sandwich • Clean Tupperware • Pack snack bags 	Make weekend plans with Christie <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google concerts happening nearby • Text Christie • Ask Mom for ride
Chemistry homework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do ion worksheet • Study for ion quiz 	Do my laundry <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sort • Wash & dry • Fold & put away 	Email my pen-pal back
English homework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pronoun worksheet 	Clean my room <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wash sheets and make bed • Clear off homework desk • Organize nail polish • Take out trash 	Plan surprise party for Alex <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make secret Facebook group for invites • Find restaurant and make reservations • Text Alex inviting her to fake event that day
French studying <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flashcards on food vocab • Review verb rules 	Practice piano <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scales • Competition piece 	
Get permission slip signed	Clean hamster cage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wash • Dry & reassemble 	
Email teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English teacher - homework load • Chem teacher - set up a meeting • History teacher - send him cool history video I found 		
Organize English binder <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put papers in correct places • Find my syllabus 		

Now our to-do list only includes tasks that will take longer than five minutes and require more intense focus. Now, we'll figure out what our Top 5 need to be – these are things that have to get done tonight. We need to get laundry done so we have clothes for the next day, we need to do our History, Chemistry, and English homework, and we need to practice our piano daily. The French flashcards can wait (the test isn't tomorrow), and everything else can get pushed to tomorrow, or dealt with after our Top 5.

Now, we sort our tasks using both the Top 5 Method and the categories.

TOP FIVE TASKS:

HOMEWORK	PERSONAL	SOCIAL
History homework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read chapter 13 • Take notes on Chap 13 	Do my laundry <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sort • Wash & dry • Fold & put away 	
Chemistry homework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do ion worksheet • Study for ion quiz 	Practice piano <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scales • Competition piece 	
English homework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pronoun worksheet 		

DO SOON TASKS:

HOMEWORK	PERSONAL	SOCIAL
French studying <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flashcards on food vocab • Review verb rules 	Clean my room <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wash sheets and make bed • Clear off homework desk • Organize nail polish 	Make weekend plans with Christie <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google concerts happening nearby
Organize English binder <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put papers in correct places 	Clean hamster cage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wash • Dry & reassemble 	Email my pen-pal back
		Plan surprise party for Alex <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find restaurant and make reservations

Now our to-do list is easier to manage – we know what we need to spend more time on, and we know what’s less important. At the end of the day, anything left on today’s Do Soon list should probably go to the next day’s Top 5.

If there's a more “fun” thing on the Do Soon list – like emailing your pen pal or looking up concerts – it might make a good “break” if you get burned out on your Top 5 list.

Now your to-do list is streamlined and manageable! Try using the Timer Method or making a Stickler Schedule to get those Top 5 tasks completed!