

ANALYZING YOUR NEED FOR STRUCTURE

INTRODUCTION

When discussing time management, the term "structure" refers to the extent and amount of detail with which your day is planned and organized, either by you or someone else. It also involves the limits placed on your time by things like due dates and deadlines. In high school, the majority of students' time is structured for them by classes, jobs and after-school activities, so the role of structure in time planning usually doesn't become an issue until university. This article defines five basic levels of structure in student time management, moving from the least to the most structured (see left menu). Each has its pros and cons.



LEVEL 1: I WORK WHEN I FEEL LIKE IT

People functioning with this level of structure appreciate, and possibly even need, a lot of flexibility and freedom. Just the word "schedule" can make them cringe and feel suffocated. Most students working at this level are usually aware of deadlines and perhaps even write them on a calendar. They may have a general idea of what they should accomplish within a given week, but most of the time they don't keep a regular written record of what they need to do. Some simply don't need to. Much of what needs to be done on an ongoing basis is reading or other work that can be put off when a crunch time comes up with few perceived negative consequences. These students are often in programs (like English, for example) where there is little day-to-day work that has to be handed in - instead, there are several major papers or assignments spaced throughout the semester. We suspect that program requirements like this may intensify the preference for this low level of structure.

Because students working at this level don't have frequent deadlines and usually don't work from a plan or task list, when they sit down to work, they like to feel that they have the freedom to do what they feel like doing at that moment. (But often they really don't, because what they usually feel like doing is the easy stuff, with the result that they're putting off overwhelming, difficult, unpleasant - and important - work.) They're not necessarily doing less work than other students - it's just distributed unevenly through the semester, compacted around due dates.

Their assignments often require synthesizing ideas and creative thinking, so these students may feel the need to wait for inspiration to strike, or for the "essay muse" to speak. Some are convinced that without the pressure of a deadline, they won't get good ideas anyway, so there's no point in starting to work on papers much ahead of time. Then, when a due date approaches, they work very intensely for a few days (and nights), collapse from lack of sleep, then coast along again, just doing reading (if that), until the next deadline. This is affectionately known as the "3C" time management technique, or the "cram-collapse-coast" method. It is atypical of the way the most businesses and institutions operate.

PROS:

- Creates perception of freedom and flexibility
- Helps some students feel that they, not their instructors, the institution or other perceived forms of "authority" are in control of their time
- Develops skills in crisis management

CONS:

- Periodic bouts of extreme stress. High risk of burn out and chronic procrastination
- Prone to spending most of the semester playing "catch-up"
- Rarely time to do more than the minimum on any assignment, so work never reflects students' true ability
- Repeated need to cram means that little information can be remembered after exams, therefore students are robbing themselves of a true education
- Reinforcement of work habits which are not consistent with most careers

LEVEL 2: MINIMAL STRUCTURE PLAN

Students who prefer a bit more structure will often keep a calendar with due dates, and sometimes a list of what they have to do, usually on a weekly basis. They may divide up tasks according to what they will do on the weekend vs. during the week, staying flexible within those parameters. To a large extent they are still "doing what they feel like doing" when they sit down to study, but because of having more frequent due dates to work towards, they have to take a more structured approach to planning their time.

Some students, whether they prefer more or less structure, feel that they have no choice but to work at this level, because of unique aspects of their lives or learning environment which control time for them. For example, some students are "on call" for work or family responsibilities, and some have limited access to the equipment or resources they need to do their work. Because of these obligations or conditions, they often simply can't get the work done that they want to or have planned to in a day. This can be a frustrating environment to manage, but here are a couple of ideas to try:

Always have something school-related to do with you to take maximum advantage of small, unexpected pieces of free time

- Try to find innovative or unusual ways to get more control over the situation or the environment.
- For example, in a lab or hospital setting, ask to have a small, quiet space set aside for studying when the opportunity arises
- Include lots of flexible time in your schedule to keep it as adaptable as possible
- Keep the time that can be set aside for studying as sacred
- Ensure that the time you can put in is used to maximum effectiveness
- Even when time is at a premium, remember the importance of Breaks and Rewards)
- Discuss your frustrations with others in the same boat - perhaps something can be done if a group strategizes on solutions and takes action

PROS:

- Maintains some sense of freedom, flexibility, and control as detailed above

CONS:

- Still vulnerable to stress, burn out, cramming and procrastination
- Work often gets pushed to the weekend, resulting in weekend overload and getting behind.
See Using Weekend Time Effectively if this is a problem for you.
- Still reinforces work habits which are not consistent with most careers

LEVEL 3: DAILY TIME PLAN

The next level of structure involves planning on a daily basis. Students at this level keep a list of what they want to accomplish each day. Typically the lists are written in one, regular, weekly planning session, when students look over the upcoming work for the week (as well as due dates on assignments extending beyond that week), set priorities, and decide what needs to be done each day to keep on top of deadlines. (See [Making a Task List](#) for specifics on how this approach works.) Students using this method report that they like crossing things off their list, so much so that if they do something that's not on the list, they'll write it down so they can cross it off. There is a sense of satisfaction when they accomplish everything on the list for the day, but often this is a struggle and doesn't happen as much as they'd like, and sometimes the work that accumulates for the weekend gets onerous as a result. See [Using Weekday Time Effectively](#) if this is a problem for you.

Working at this level of structure significantly reduces the risk of procrastination, although some students report that they tend to do the easy tasks first, again for that satisfaction of crossing items off the list, and end up leaving the difficult or unpleasant tasks for the end of the day. For more information on this see [Finding Your Best Time of Day](#).

It's also important to incorporate [Flexible Time](#) when working with this level of structure, as a means of allowing for the unexpected, and to ensure that everything on the list can get done when a task takes longer than anticipated or when something unexpected comes up.

PROS:

- Reduced risk of procrastination
- Increased effectiveness by working on a steady, daily basis
- Satisfaction of crossing items off the list
- Reasonable sense of organization and control over the workload

CONS:

- Possible reduced sense of freedom and flexibility
- Requires motivation and self-discipline to accomplish items on a daily list
- Danger of pushing difficult tasks to the end of the day
- Requires realistic goal setting and accurate sense of how long tasks will take to avoid getting behind.

Our experience indicates that this level of structure seems to work the best for most university students. At crunch times in the semester, or for those who need more structure to work effectively, there are two other options.

LEVEL 4: SEGMENTED DAY PLAN

The segmented day plan is a nice compromise between level 3 and level 5. With this level of structure, the day is divided into morning, afternoon and evening, and tasks are defined for each of these periods. As an alternative strategy, rather than determine which subject- related task will be done in each segment, some students prefer to plan the type of task that will be done. For example, students who get sleepy when reading will plan to do the reading for all their subjects at the time of day when they are most alert. So, for example, Monday afternoon is reading time, rather than Psych or Chem time. By scheduling tough tasks for the morning or afternoon, the stress that goes along with having them hang over your head all day can be reduced.

PROS:

- Provides flexibility within a more structured approach to planning
- Reduces problem of difficult tasks getting pushed to the end of the day

CONS:

- More chance of reduced sense of freedom and flexibility
- More motivation and self-discipline required to accomplish items as per plan
- Requires realistic goal setting and accurate sense of how long tasks will take to avoid getting behind

LEVEL 5: HOURLY TIME PLAN

The most structured time plan involves defining which study tasks will be done at which particular time in the day, hour by hour. It is effective for students who work best with a high level of structure, or for students who need it only during crunch times, like exams. It is the best method we know of for getting (or getting back) and keeping a feeling of control over the workload.

Although planning hour by hour may seem restrictive, there are strategies that can be built in to allow for some reasonable human flexibility. Flexible time is the best of these. Perhaps the best thing about using this level of structure is that it requires you to make thoughtful, intelligent decisions about the best way to use your time. It enables you to see exactly how much work you have to do, and decide when to do it, which in turn makes it clear that you are responsible for the way you use your time. It sounds serious and grown-up, and it is.

PROS:

- Best method for feeling in control of workload
- Minimal risk of procrastination
- Provides realistic account of how much work there is to do
- Ensures most important tasks are done at peak times of day

CONS:

- Provides least amount of spontaneous choice
- Requires motivation and self-discipline to stick to time plan
- Requires realistic goal setting and accurate sense of how long tasks will take to avoid getting behind

THE NEXT STEPS

Now that you've learned about the varying levels of structure possible in time planning, you have two tasks. First, determine what level you're working at now. Second, figure out what level of structure you think you need to be working at. Determining these two levels is an essential part of getting to know yourself and your needs, which in turn is the foundation for developing an effective time plan.

As a first step for those who aren't satisfied with their time management, try the planning strategies for one level higher than where you're working, and two levels if you're feeling really stressed. Try the suggested methods for that level for at least one week (two weeks is better) and then evaluate the changes, if any, in how effectively you're using time. Determine what is working and what is not, and try something else. Persistence and patience are necessities when developing a time plan that will work for you.

Visit Efficiency and Effectiveness in [Time Management Introduction](#) for related information.