BREAK IT UP AND SPREAD IT OUT

INTRODUCTION

One of the most common time planning errors students make is spending a long time on the same task or the same subject. Doing this may seem sensible and practical - planning is simplified, you bring along fewer books and materials and stay in the same location, and the large chunk of time devoted to one subject has the promise of focused, concentrated productivity, ensuring that everything gets done before a particular class or deadline.

However, working in this manner ignores one of the most important principles of effective time management and can create unexpected problems such as poor concentration. Students who read for two or three hours at a stretch, and then wonder why they can't remember what they've just read, aren't aware that concentration and motivation go down (and stress goes up) when too long is spent doing the same type of task. To avoid this follow the "break it up and spread it out" principle.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

If you have three hours of reading to do for Sociology, spend one hour a day for three days, rather than three hours on the same day doing the reading. In a large chunk of study time (two hours or more), alternate subjects. During a three-hour study period, for example, you could spend one hour on each of three different subjects, or one-and-a-half hours on two subjects, rather than a three-hour marathon on just one. In order to do this and not get behind or miss deadlines, it's important to have a long-range view of the work ahead and use a fairly structured method of time planning.

This being said, we realize that some tasks (like a thesis, major paper, or art or design project) simply lend themselves to longer stretches of work time. When extended or concentrated periods of work make sense for the task, make this time as effective as possible by monitoring your concentration level and taking short, frequent breaks (10-15 minutes long) and occasional long breaks (45-60 minutes) when you need them. You may also want to change location periodically for some variety (see "External Study Environment" in Managing Distractions). Look for different kinds of "subtasks" (finding primary material, skimming for information, reading and taking notes, making an outline, doing a rough draft, revising, proofing, editing, getting feedback) that can be alternated as the project progresses.

Sometimes spending a long stretch of time on the same subject is unavoidable, like when preparing for an exam. In situations like this, alternating the type of task is also useful. For example, spend one hour condensing and making study notes from lectures, one hour reviewing the textbook, one hour trying practice questions, etc. Keep in mind that this one-hour time frame we've mentioned is only used as an example and may be too long or short for some tasks - the "best" method is always what works best for you.