

FINDING YOUR BEST TIME OF DAY

INTRODUCTION

Getting the maximum effectiveness from the time you put into studying depends, in part, on when during the day you do particular tasks. The natural tendency for students (and for a lot of other busy people) is to do easy tasks first, postponing the difficult ones until "later." This tendency probably stems from the need to feel that something productive has been accomplished even while avoiding a task that is difficult, unpleasant or overwhelming.

However, putting off the tough stuff can begin a vicious cycle. Let's say, for example, that Student A dreads doing Calculus assignments. Calculus is her lowest mark and her toughest course so she knows it should be her highest priority. But she's been finding the problem sets frustrating and difficult, and as a result Calculus assignments are left to the very last moment, usually late in the evening before her 8:30am class. She spends the whole day thinking and worrying about the problem set and doing other things that do need to get done, but are a lot easier to face than Calculus.



When she can't put it off any longer and finally sits down to try the problems, she's not only stressed about doing them, she feels overwhelmed by how many she has to do before she can go to bed. And she's tired - her concentration is poor and her eyes hurt. What are the chances that Calculus can get her best effort under these conditions? The result for this student is that the tough stuff gets all the tougher, which means she dislikes the subject even more, which means that she puts off doing the next assignment as long as possible yet again, which means the problems are all the more difficult - you get the idea.

Shakespeare said that a coward dies a thousand deaths. This means that every time a coward thinks or worries about the possibility of dying, he experiences some of the stress of that moment. And so it is for our struggling Calculus student. Every time she thinks about that problem set, she gets a knot in her stomach. Now, compare Student A's approach to Calculus to another student's.

Student B is also not that good at Calculus and is finding the problem sets frustrating and difficult. But, this student makes sure she tackles them when her energy and concentration are at their best. As a result, she is able to put her best effort into her most difficult work. She intentionally spreads out working on the problems over several days, doing them a few at a time so she can stop when she gets stuck or feels frustrated. And, if there are questions she just can't get, she has time to get help from her instructor, a classmate, or a TA in the Math & Stats help lab. Rather than "dying a thousand deaths" every time she thinks about her Calculus assignment, she experiences a sense of relief and satisfaction because she's making progress and knows that Calculus is under control.

FINDING WHEN YOU WORK BEST

To determine your best time of day, consider your body's natural highs and lows. Become sensitive to and consciously aware of things like your energy level, concentration, and motivation. Are you a morning person? Do you concentrate best after lunch? Is early evening when you have the most energy? Or do you believe that your best time for working is after midnight?

Keep in mind that humans are by nature diurnal, not nocturnal animals, so physiologically working after midnight may not be the best idea. Sometimes students become convinced that they work best late at night because by that time a lot of pressure has built up on them and they have no choice but to be productive. If you're used to regularly staying up till 2 or 3am, you don't necessarily need to change, but do look seriously at how you could be more productive during the day. You might be spending daytime hours on non-academic activities that could be better spent on studying. (For more information on this [Using Weekday Time Effectively](#).)

If you decide to try and change the late night habit, do it gradually, by going to bed 20 minutes earlier every three or four days until you're in bed by midnight. And keep in mind that unless you're planning a career which involves shift work, most businesses and institutions generally work on a 9am to 5pm schedule. Chances are you'll have to get used to it sooner or later.

STRATEGIES TO TRY

Once you've determined your best time of day, plan to do your most difficult and challenging work then. Save shopping, housework or fitness activities for late in the afternoon or evening if, like many students, that's when you're normally tired.

Don't be surprised if you find it difficult to motivate yourself to do the tough stuff first. In a way it's going against human nature - the inclination many of us have to start with something easy. The rewards, however, are worth the effort. Difficult tasks will get done more quickly and with less stress.

If you do the challenging the most difficult task sooner rather than later, every time your mind wanders back to it for the rest of the day you'll get a feeling of relief and satisfaction that it's done.