GETTING STARTED: JUST DO IT

HELPFUL IDEAS

Sometimes the most difficult part of completing a task is just getting started on it. If you have trouble getting into a task, but are fine once you get started, here are some ideas that might help:

- Become aware of any rules or "rituals" you may have developed and how they are impairing your ability to get down to work quickly. For example, we knew a student who couldn't start his calculus problems until he had at least six pencils sharpened to an exact point. This developed gradually from his annoyance with having to get up and constantly sharpen pencils. It got to the point, however, where even if he had time to do the work, he wouldn't or couldn't start without the pencils, because he believed he would "just waste too much time sharpening one or two anyway." This may seem irrational and even silly, but "rules" like this can have a very powerful effect on the way some students work.

- Before you begin a study session set a goal for what you want to accomplish. Although goals can be problematic for some students (see the next paragraph), many students find that they are more focused and work more effectively when there is something specific that they want to get done. Goals can backfire, however, so be cautious about how you set them. If you decide that you want to read a twenty-page chapter in one hour, you may find you're more focused on your progress (constantly checking the clock and counting how many pages are left, etc.) than you are on the material you're supposed to be learning. It's a better idea to either set a time limit (I'll get as far as I can in an hour) OR a page limit (I'm going to read chapter 3) than it is to set a goal involving both.

- Do a reality check on your goals and expectations for what you can accomplish. If you decide that you want to read three Psych chapters in one evening, the chances are good that you'll put the task off because it's just too overwhelming. Students who are high achieving and/or perfectionistic tend to set high goals, to inspire or push themselves to accomplish more. There's nothing wrong with setting goals that are challenging, but they have to be achievable. It's when the goals are so lofty that they are unrealistic that they become a problem. However, it's difficult for some students to set a realistic goal because to them it would be "too easy" or "below their abilities." Isn't it better to aim high? No! - not if the goal is unrealistic. It's like shooting yourself in the foot - if you set a goal that's too high and then don't reach it, or are intimidated to even try, the result is often frustration, guilt, self-blaming and procrastination. Try to obtain satisfaction from the fact that, although you didn't achieve as much as you would have liked to, or perhaps as much as you're ultimately capable of, you did achieve something.

- If you tend to spend too much time on one part of a project - say, for example, the research for a paper, but procrastinate on the next step, like writing, establish start deadlines. These are deadlines when you will proceed with what you have at that point, realizing that you could do more, but must work within a time line.

- If your program involves creative projects such as writing or designing, look for ways to actively pursue inspiration rather than waiting for it. See Death by Deadline for ideas on this.

MAKING A MOUND OUT OF A MOUNTAIN

Procrastination often results when a task seems difficult, unpleasant or overpowering. You can bring a nasty assignment down to size and make it less intimidating with this method.

As soon as you get the assignment, set aside a mere 10 or 15 minutes a day to work on it. By spending only a few minutes each day, you're accomplishing a small and less intimidating task - one that is a lot less likely to get put off. Once you're involved in the assignment, it may even engage your interest, motivating you to spend more time on it.

By the end of the first week, you'll have done at least an hour of solid (but fairly painless) work. You may discover that the assignment wasn't quite as bad as you thought. At the very least, you'll have a more realistic sense of its scope. And by starting early, you won't give it a chance to swell to an overwhelming size in the back of your mind. Its power to intimidate, normally fed by your procrastinating, has been nipped in the bud. You've made a mound out of a mountain.

Be cautious with large projects that require substantial, sustained periods of work - a thesis would take an awfully long time if you only worked on it for 10 minutes a day! Manageable, regular work periods are the key to success on any major project, while starting early helps to ensure that due dates will be met.