

25

ways to get the most out of now

The following time management techniques are about when to study, where to study, ways to handle the rest of the world, and things you can ask yourself when you get stuck. As you read, underline, circle, or otherwise note the suggestions you think you can use.

Pick two or three techniques to use now. When they become habits, come back to this article and pick a couple more.



When to study

1. Study difficult (or "boring") subjects first. If your chemistry problems put you to sleep, get to them first, while you are fresh. We tend to study what we like first, yet the courses we find most difficult often require the most creative energy. Save the subjects you enjoy for later. If you find yourself avoiding a particular subject, get up an hour early to study it before breakfast. With that chore out of the way, the rest of the day can be a breeze.

Continually avoiding a subject might indicate a trouble area. Further action is called for. Clarify your feelings about the course by writing about those feelings in a journal, talking to an instructor, or asking for help from a friend or counselor. Consistently avoiding study tasks can also be a signal to re-examine your major or course program.

2. Be aware of your best time of day. Many people learn best in daylight hours. If this is true for you, schedule study time for your most difficult subjects when the sun is up.

Unless you grew up on a farm, the idea of being conscious at 4 a.m. might seem ridiculous. Yet many successful business people begin the day at 5 a.m. or earlier. Athletes and yogis use this time too. Some writers complete their best work before 9 a.m.

Some people experience the same benefits by staying up late. They flourish after midnight.

If you aren't convinced, then experiment. When you're in a time crunch, get up early or stay up late. The new benefits you discover might even include seeing a sunrise.

3. Use waiting time. Five minutes waiting for a bus, 20 minutes waiting for the dentist, 10 minutes between classes—waiting time adds up fast. Have short study tasks ready to do during these times. For example, carry 3x5 cards with facts, formulas, or definitions and pull them out anywhere.

A tape recorder can help you use commuting time to your advantage. Make a cassette tape of yourself reading your notes. Then play these tapes in a car stereo as you drive, or listen through your earphones as you ride on the bus or exercise.



Where to study

4. Use a regular study area. Your body and your mind know where you are. When you use the same place to study, day after day, they become trained. When you arrive at that particular place, you can focus your attention more quickly.

5. Study where you'll be alert. In bed, your body gets a signal. For most students, it's more likely to be "Time to sleep" than "Time to study!" For that reason, don't sleep where you study. Just as you train your body to be alert at your desk, you also train it to slow down near your bed.

Easy chairs and sofas are also dangerous places to study. Learning requires energy. Give your body a message that energy is needed. Put yourself into a situation that supports that message.

6. Use a library. Libraries are designed for learning. The lighting is perfect. The noise level is low. Materials are available. Entering a library is a signal to quiet the mind and get to work. Most people can get more done in a shorter time at the library. Experiment for yourself.



Ways to handle the rest of the world

7. Pay attention to your attention. Breaks in concentration are often caused by internal interruptions. Your own thoughts jump in to tell you another story about the world. When that happens, notice the thoughts and let them go.

Perhaps the thought of getting something else done is distracting you. One option is to handle that task now and study later. Or write yourself a note about it, or schedule a specific time to do it.

8. Agree with living mates about study time. This includes roommates, parents, spouses, and kids. Make the rules clear, and be sure to follow them yourself.

Explicit agreements—even written contracts—work well. One student always wears a colorful hat when she wants to study. When her husband and children see the hat, they respect her wish to be left alone.

9. Get off the phone. The telephone is the ultimate interrupter. People who wouldn't think of distracting you might call at the worst times because they can't see that you are studying. You don't have to be a telephone victim. If a simple "I can't talk, I'm studying" doesn't work, use dead silence. It's a conversation killer. Or short-circuit the whole problem: Unplug the phone. Get an answering machine or study at the library.

10. Learn to say no. This is a timesaver and valuable life skill for everyone. Many people feel it is rude to refuse a request. But saying no can be done effectively and courteously. Others want you to succeed as a student. When you tell them that you can't do what they ask because you are busy educating yourself, most people will understand.

11. Hang a "do not disturb" sign on your door. Many hotels will give you one free, just for the advertising. Or you can make a creative one. They work. Using signs can relieve you of making a decision about cutting off each interruption—a timesaver in itself.

12. Get ready the night before. Completing a few simple tasks just before you go to bed can help you get in gear faster the next day. If you need to make some phone calls first thing in the morning, look up those numbers, write them on 3x5 cards, and set them near the phone. If you are set to drive to a new location, make note of the address and put it next to your car keys. If you plan to spend the afternoon writing a paper, get your materials together: dictionary, notes, outline, paper, and pencil (or disks and computer). Pack your lunch or gas up the car. Organize the diaper bag, briefcase, or backpack.

13. Call ahead. Often we think of talking on the telephone as a prime time-waster. Used wisely, the telephone can actually help you manage time. Before you go shopping, call the store to see if it carries the items you're looking for. If you're driving, call for directions to your destination. A few seconds on the phone can save hours in wasted trips and wrong turns.

14. Avoid noise distractions. To promote concentration, avoid studying in front of the television and turn off the stereo. Many students insist they study better with background noise, and that may be true. Some students report good results with carefully selected and controlled music. The overwhelming majority of research indicates that silence is the best form of music for study.

At times noise may seem out of your control. A neighbor or roommate decides to find out how far he can turn up his stereo before the walls crumble. Meanwhile, your concentration on the principles of sociology goes down the tubes.

To get past this barrier, schedule study sessions for times when your living environment is usually quiet. If you live in a residence hall, ask if study rooms are available. Or go somewhere else, where it's quiet, such as the library. Some students have even found refuge in quiet restaurants, laundromats, and churches.

15. Notice how others misuse your time. Be aware of repeat offenders. Ask yourself if there are certain friends or relatives who consistently interrupt your study time. If avoiding the interrupter is impractical, send a clear message. Sometimes others don't realize they are breaking your concentration. You can give them a gentle yet firm reminder. If your message doesn't work, there are ways to make it more effective. For more ideas, see Chapter Ten.



Things you can ask yourself when you get stuck

16. Ask: What is one task I can accomplish toward my goal? This is a useful technique to use on big, imposing jobs. Pick out one small accomplishment, preferably one you can complete in about five minutes; then do it. The satisfaction of getting one thing done often spurs you on to get one more thing done. Meanwhile, the job gets smaller.

17. Ask: Am I being too hard on myself? If you are feeling frustrated with a reading assignment, noticing that your attention wanders repeatedly, or falling behind on problems due for tomorrow, take a minute to listen to the messages you are giving yourself. Are you scolding yourself too harshly? Lighten up. Allow yourself to feel a little foolish and get on with it. Don't add to the problem by berating yourself.

Worrying about the future is another way people beat themselves up: "How will I ever get this all done?" "What if every paper I write turns out to be this hard?" "If I can't do the simple calculations now, how will I ever pass the final?" Instead of promoting learning, such questions fuel anxiety.

Labeling and generalizing weaknesses are other ways people are hard on themselves. Being objective and specific will eliminate this form of self-punishment and will likely generate new possibilities. An alternative to saying "I'm terrible in algebra" is to say "I don't understand factoring equations." This suggests a plan to improve.

18. Ask: Is this a piano? Carpenters who build rough frames for buildings have a saying they use when they bend a nail or hack a chunk out of a two-by-four: "Well, this ain't no piano." It means perfection is not necessary.

Ask yourself if what you are doing needs to be perfect. You don't have to apply the same standards of grammar to review notes that you apply to a term paper. If you can complete a job 95 percent perfectly in two hours, and 100 percent perfectly in four hours, ask yourself whether the additional 5 percent improvement is worth doubling the amount of time you spend.

Sometimes it is a piano. A tiny mistake can ruin an entire lab experiment. Computers are notorious for turning little errors into monsters. Accept lower standards only where they are appropriate.

A related suggestion is to weed out low-priority tasks. The to-do list for a large project can include dozens of items. Not all of them are equally important. Some can be done later on, and others could be skipped altogether if time is short.

Apply this idea when you study.

In a long reading assignment, look for pages you can skim or skip. When it's appropriate, read chapter summaries or article abstracts. When reviewing your notes, look for material that may not be covered on a test and decide whether you want to study it.

19. Ask: Would I pay myself for what I'm doing right now? If you were employed as a student, would you be earning your wages? Ask yourself this question when you notice that you've taken your third popcorn break in 30 minutes. Most students are, in fact, employed as students. They are investing in their own productivity and paying a big price for the privilege of being a student. Sometimes they don't realize what a mediocre job may cost them.

20. Ask: Can I do just one more thing? Ask yourself this question at the end of a long day. Almost always you will have enough energy to do just one more short task. The overall increase in your productivity might surprise you.

21. Ask: Am I making time for things that are important but not urgent? If we spend most of our time putting out fires, we may feel drained and frustrated. According to Stephen R. Covey¹, this happens when we forget to take time for things that are truly important but not urgent. Examples are regular exercise, reading, prayer or meditation, quality time with friends and family,

solitude, traveling, and cooking nutritious meals. Each of these can contribute directly to a long-term goal or life mission. Yet when schedules get tight, it's tempting to let these things go for that elusive day when we'll "finally have more time."

That day won't come until we choose to make time for what's truly important. Knowing this, we can use some of the suggestions in this chapter to free up more time.

22. Ask: Can I delegate this? Instead of slogging through complicated tasks alone, you can draw on the talent and energy of other people. Busy executives know the value of delegating tasks to coworkers. Without delegation, many projects would flounder or die.

You can apply the same principle. Instead of doing all the housework or cooking by yourself, for example, assign some of the tasks to family members or roommates. Rather than making a trip to the library to look up a simple fact, call and ask a library assistant to do it. Instead of driving across town to deliver a package, hire a delivery service to do it. All these tactics can free up extra hours for studying.

It's not practical to delegate certain study tasks, such as writing term papers or completing reading assignments. However, you can still draw on the ideas of other people in completing such tasks. For instance, form a writing group to edit and critique papers, brainstorm topics or titles, and develop lists of sources.

If you're absent from a class, find a classmate to explain the lecture, discussion, and any assignments due. Presidents depend on briefings. You can use the technique too.



23. Ask: How did I just waste time?
Notice when time passes and you haven't accomplished what you planned. Take a minute to review your actions and note the specific ways you wasted time. We operate by habit and tend to waste time in the same ways over and over again. When you are aware of things you do that kill your time, you are more likely to catch yourself in the act next time. Observing one small quirk may save you hours. One reminder: Noting how you waste time is not the same as feeling guilty about it. The point is not to blame yourself but to increase your skill. That means getting specific information about how you use time.

24. Ask: Could I find the time if I really wanted to? Often the way people speak rules out the option of finding more time. An alternative is to speak about time with more possibility.

The next time you're tempted to say, "I just don't have time," pause for a minute. Question the truth of this statement. Could you find four more hours this week for studying? Suppose that someone offered to pay you \$10,000 to find those four hours. Suppose, too, that you will get paid only if you don't lose sleep, call in sick for work, or sacrifice anything important to you. Could you find the time if vast sums of money were involved?

Remember that when it comes to school, vast sums of money *are* involved.

25. Ask: Am I willing to promise it? This may be the most powerful time management idea of all. If you want to find time for a task, promise yourself—and others—that you'll get it done. To make this technique work, do more than say that you'll try or that you'll give it your best shot. Take an oath, as you would in court. Give your word.

One way to accomplish big things in life is to make big promises. There's little reward in promising what's safe or predictable. No athlete promises to place seventh in the Olympics. Chances are that if we're not making large promises, we're not stretching ourselves.

The point of making a promise is not to chain ourselves to rigid schedules or impossible expectations. We can also promise to reach goals without unbearable stress. We can keep schedules flexible and carry out our plans with ease, joy, and satisfaction.

At times we can go too far. Some promises are truly beyond us and we may break them. However, failing to keep a promise is just that—failing to keep a promise. A broken promise is not the worst thing in the world.

Promises can work magic. When our word is on the line, it's possible to discover reserves of time and energy we didn't know existed. Promises can push us to a breakthrough.

