Time management is essential for success in graduate school but there are as many different methods for managing your time as there are pages in your fundamental theories book. Well, maybe not that many, but there are a few preliminary steps that can be taken to manage the many large projects you need to balance.

Understanding the Big Picture

The first step is to understand the scope of your coursework and your semester. First, review your syllabi and read thoroughly each larger assignment (literature review, proposal, presentation, book review, etc.) Use a semester-at-a-glance or monthly calendar to put in all your deadlines. This will help you identify periods of time where several projects are due closely together.

Prioritizing

There are several different ways to prioritize projects. One way is by value or weight, i.e., is this something of high value to my grade in the course? Another way is chronologically, i.e., what is due first? Yet another way is by preference, i.e., which task do I want to work on? An alternative way to prioritize is by difficulty, i.e., getting the most difficult task done first. A final way to prioritize is by time, i.e., this task will take the most amount of time so it should be done first. Prioritizing is a personal task that should be done before daily planning can happen. Covey revolutionized to do lists by adding his ABC123 priority system. Items that must be done are marked with an A, should be done are marked with a B, and could be done are marked with a C. Then inside each list (A,B,C) items are further prioritized by numerals (1, 2, 3...).

Two Different Methods

Many students would prefer to operate in the “one shot” method that was so successful in their undergraduate years (Becker, 1986). Unfortunately, graduate projects require more time and much more editing and revision to meet the expectations of faculty. But this method might still work for smaller projects, so keep it in mind. But since we are talking about larger projects you need to have a realistic timeframe in mind for each task and plan for the unexpected by giving yourself a buffer. By planning out the various stages of your assignment, and how long they will take, you can effectively back date your plan from the due date to the start date. By slowly chipping away at the larger projects you are able to accomplish a little each week and avoid procrastination. Additionally, it keeps the projects fresh in your head so that your “ramp up” time is downplayed. What follows is a sample break down for a larger assignment, in this case, a literature review that is suppose to include twenty sources.
Sample Backdating of Project

As you can see in this example, a good literature review can take about 49 days to put together, if you are being reasonable about the amount of time you have to commit to it on a daily basis. This means about 7 weeks for the entire process and assumes you are working on other large projects simultaneously. This might seem like a long time for one project, but if you consider that this is your one major project for the course, then giving it seven weeks is fair when compared to it’s priority or weight in the course. Can it be written faster? Yes. Should it be? Probably not if you want something thorough and high quality.

Daily Productivity

Boice (1990) recommended that faculty write for 30 minutes a day on major projects so as to avoid the guilt cycle that procrastination can build and ensure regular productivity. Rice (2009), in her article about Dr. Saundra McGuire’s success in promoting learning strategies, highlights one of Dr. McGuire’s most popular strategies—power hours. These productive hours include a 5 minute preview of what needs to be accomplished, 40 minutes of solid work, a 10 minute break, and a 5 minute review to see if the power hour accomplished it’s goal. Daily writing and power hours are both positive ways to chip away at large projects, such as a literature review.

To manage one’s time and balance all that life has in store for you is truly something we should all strive for. It is not a science to be exacted, but an art form to be carefully crafted, practiced, and refined.

Resources


