



# 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 will be helpful. Pick two or three techniques to use now. When they become habits, come back to this article and select 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 give top priority to what we enjoy studying, yet the courses we find most difficult often require the most creative energy. Save your favorite subjects for later. If you find yourself avoiding a particular subject, get up an hour earlier to study it before breakfast. With that chore out of the way, the rest of the day can be a breeze.

Continually being late with course assignments indicates a trouble area. Further action is required. Clarify your intentions about the course by writing down your feelings in a journal, talking with 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 before nightfall.

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.

For others, the same benefits are experienced 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. You might even see a sunrise.

**3. Use waiting time.** Five minutes waiting for a subway, 20 minutes waiting for the dentist, 10 minutes in between classes—waiting time adds up fast. Have short study tasks ready to do during these periods. For example, you can 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 tape cassettes of yourself reading your notes. Then play these tapes in a car stereo as you drive, or listen through your headphones as you ride on the bus or subway.

## Where to study

**4. Use a regular study area.** Your body and your mind know where you are. Using the same place to study, day after day, helps train your responses. 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, that signal is more likely to be "Time to sleep!" than "Time to study!" Just as you train your body to be alert at your desk, you also train it to slow down near your bed. For that reason, don't study where you sleep.

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

Some schools offer empty classrooms as places to study. Many students report finding themselves studying effectively in a classroom setting.

**6. Use a library.** Libraries are designed for learning. The lighting is perfect. The noise level is low. A wealth of material is available. Entering a library is a signal to focus the mind and get to work. Many students can get more done in a shorter time frame at the library than anywhere else. Experiment for yourself.

### Student Voices

I am a person who can be easily distracted, and the library has the fewest distractions for me. My home has the most distractions, with TV, food, people coming over, and my cat begging for attention. I know that if I really want to learn, I need to make a trip to the library.

— JAMES HEAD



## 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 divert you from your studies. When this happens, notice these thoughts and let them go.

Perhaps the thought of getting something else done is distracting you. One option is to handle that other 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, spouses, and children. 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. Other solutions include getting an answering machine and studying at the library.

**10. Learn to say "no."** This is a timesaver and a valuable life skill for everyone. Some 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 a free sign, for the advertising. Or you can create a sign yourself. 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 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 need 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 next 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 your diaper bag, briefcase, or backpack.

**13. Call ahead.** We often think of talking on the telephone as a prime time-waster. Used wisely, the telephone can actually help 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 radio. Many students insist that they study better with background noise, and this might be true. Some students report good results with carefully selected and controlled music. For many others, silence is the best form of music to study by.

At times noise levels might be out of your control. A neighbor or roommate might decide to find out how far he can turn up his CD player before the walls crumble.

Meanwhile, your ability to concentrate on the principles of sociology goes down the drain. To avoid this scenario, schedule study sessions during periods 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 places of worship.

**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 that they are breaking your concentration. You can give them a gentle yet firm reminder. If this doesn't work, there are ways to make your message more effective. For more ideas, see the Communicating chapter.

## Things you can ask yourself when you get stuck

**16. Ask: What is one task I can accomplish toward achieving my goal?** This is a helpful technique to use when faced with 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 can spur 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, notice that your attention wanders repeatedly, or fall behind on math problems that are due 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 then get on with the task at hand. 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 all this done? What if every paper I'm assigned 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 help 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 rewording suggests a plan to improve.

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

### Keep going?

Some people keep going, even when they get stuck or fail again and again. To such people belongs the world. Consider the hapless politician who compiled this record:

- Failed in business, 1831
- Defeated for legislature, 1832
- Second failure in business, 1833
- Suffered nervous breakdown, 1836
- Defeated for Speaker, 1838
- Defeated for Elector, 1840
- Defeated for Congress, 1843
- Defeated for Senate, 1855
- Defeated for Vice President, 1856
- Defeated for Senate, 1858
- Elected President, 1860

Who was the fool who kept on going in spite of so many failures?

Answer: The fool was Abraham Lincoln.

that 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 lecture 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 miscalculation can ruin an entire lab experiment. A misstep in solving a complex math problem can negate hours of work. Computers are notorious for turning little errors into nightmares. Accept lower standards only when 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 which are equally important. Some can be done later on, while 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 might 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 snack 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 doing a mediocre job might 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 can feel drained and frustrated. According to Stephen R. Covey,<sup>4</sup> this happens when we forget to take time for things that are not urgent but are truly important. Examples include exercising regularly, reading, praying or meditating, spending quality time alone or with family and friends, traveling, and cooking nutritious meals. Each of these can contribute directly to a long-term goal or life mission. Yet when schedules get tight, we often forgo these things, waiting 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.

## Remember cultural differences

There are as many different styles for managing time as there are people. These styles vary across cultures.

In the United States and England, for example, business meetings typically start on time. That's also true in Scandinavian countries such as Norway and Sweden. However, travelers to Panama might find that meetings start about a half-hour late. And people who complain about late meetings while doing business in Mexico might be considered rude.

Cultural differences can get even more pronounced. In her book *Freedom and Culture*, anthropologist Dorothy Lee writes about a group of people in the Trobriand

Islands east of New Guinea.<sup>5</sup> Their language has no verb tenses—no distinction between past, present, and future. The Trobrianders celebrate each event as an end in itself, not as a means to achieve some future goal. In this culture, the whole concept of time management would have little meaning.

When you study or work with people of different races and ethnic backgrounds, look for differences in their approach to time. A behavior that you might view as rude or careless—such as showing up late for appointments—could simply result from seeing the world in a different way.

**22. Ask: Can I delegate this?** Instead of slogging through complicated tasks alone, you can draw on the talents 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, you can assign some of the tasks to family members or roommates. Rather than making a trip to the library to look up a simple fact, you can call and ask a library assistant to research it for you. Instead of driving across town to deliver a package, you can hire a delivery service to do so. All of 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 others 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 summarize the lecture, discussion, and any assignments due. Presidents depend on briefings. You can use this technique, too.

**23. Ask: How did I just waste time?** Notice when time passes and you haven't accomplished what you had planned to do. 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 drain your time, you are more likely to catch yourself in the act next time. Observing one small quirk might save you hours. But keep this in mind: 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 might 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 Olympic games. 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 a rigid schedule or to 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 might break them. However, failing to keep a promise is just that—failing to keep a promise. A broken promise is not the worst disaster 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 exceed our expectations.



# Time management for right-brained people

**A**sk some people about managing time, and a dreaded image appears in their minds. They see a person with a 50-item to-do list clutching a calendar chock full of appointments. They imagine a robot who values cold efficiency, compulsively accounts for every minute, and is too rushed to develop personal relationships. Often this image is what's behind the comment "Yeah, there are some good ideas in those time-management books, but I'll never get around to using them. Too much work."

These stereotypes about time management hold a kernel of truth. Sometimes people who pride themselves on efficiency are merely keeping busy. In their rush to check items off their to-do lists, they might be fussing over things that don't need doing—insignificant tasks that create little or no value in the first place. If this is one of your fears, relax. The point of managing time is not to overload your schedule with extra obligations. Instead, the aim is to get the important things done and still have time to be human. An effective time manager is productive and relaxed at the same time.

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**Personal style enters the picture, too. Many of the suggestions in this chapter appeal to “left-brained” people—those who thrive on making lists, scheduling events, and handling details. These suggestions might not work for people who like to see wholes and think visually. Remember that the strategies discussed in this chapter represent just one set of options for managing time.**

**The trick is to discover what works for you. Do give time-management strategies a fair chance. Some might be suitable, with a few modifications. Instead of writing a conventional to-do list, for instance, you can plot your day on a mind map. (Mind maps are explained in the Notes chapter.) Or write to-do’s, one per 3x5 card, in any order in which tasks occur to you. Later you can edit, sort, and rank the cards, choosing which items to act on.**

**Strictly speaking, time cannot be managed. Time is a mystery, an abstract concept that cannot be captured in words. The minutes, hours, days, and years march on whether we manage anything or not. What we *can* do is manage ourselves in respect to time. A few basic principles can do that as well as a truckload of cold-blooded techniques.**

**Know your values.** Begin by managing time from a bigger picture. Instead of thinking in terms of minutes or hours, view your life as a whole. Consider what that expanse of time is all about.

As a thought-provoking exercise, write your own obituary. Describe the way you want to be remembered. List the contributions you intend to make during your lifetime. If this is too spooky, write a short mission statement for your life—a paragraph that describes your values and the kind of life you want to lead. Periodically during the day, stop to ask if what you’re doing is contributing to those goals.

**Do less.** Managing time is as much about dropping worthless activities as about adding new and useful ones. The idea is to weed out those actions that deliver little reward.

Decide right now to eliminate activities with a low payoff. When you add a new item to your schedule, consider dropping a current one.

**Slow down.** Sometimes it’s useful to hurry, such as when you’re late for a meeting or about to miss a train. At other times, haste is a choice that serves no real purpose. If you’re speeding through the day like a launched missile, consider what would happen if you got to your next destination a little bit later than planned. Rushing to stay a step ahead might not be worth the added strain.

**Remember people.** Few people on their deathbed ever say, “I wish I’d spent more time at the office.” They’re more likely to say, “I wish I’d spent more time with my family and friends.” The pace of daily life can lead us to neglect the people we cherish.

Efficiency is a concept that applies to things—not people. When it comes to maintaining and nurturing relationships, we can often benefit from loosening up our schedules. We can allow extra time for conflict management, spontaneous visits, and free-ranging conversations.





**Focus on outcomes.** You might feel guilty when you occasionally stray from your schedule and spend two hours napping or watching soap operas. But if you're regularly meeting your goals and leading a fulfilling life, there's probably no harm done. When managing time, the overall goal of personal effectiveness counts more than the means used to achieve it. This can be true even when your time-management style differs from that recommended by experts.

Likewise, there are many methods for planning your time. Some people prefer a written action plan that carefully details each step leading to a long-range goal. Others just note the due date for accomplishing a goal and periodically assess their progress. Either strategy can work.

Visualizing the desired outcome can be as important as having a detailed action plan. Here's an experiment. Write a list of goals you plan to accomplish over the next six months. Then create a vivid mental picture of yourself attaining them and enjoying the resulting benefits.

Visualize this image several times in the next few weeks. File the list away, making a note on your calendar to review it in six months. At that time, note how many of your goals you have actually accomplished.

**Handle it now.** A backlog of unfinished tasks can result from postponing decisions or procrastinating. An alternative is to handle the task or decision immediately. Answer that letter now. Make that phone call as soon as it occurs to you.

You can also save time by graciously saying no immediately to projects that you don't want to take on. Saying "I'll think about doing that and get back to you later" might mean that you'll have to take more time to say no later.

**Buy less.** Before you purchase an item, ask how much time it will take to locate, assemble, use, repair, and maintain it. You might be able to free up hours by doing without. If the product comes with a 400-page manual or 20 hours of training, beware. Before rushing to the store to add another possession to your life, see if you can reuse or adapt something you already own.

**Forget about time.** Schedule "downtime"—a period when you're accountable to no one else and have nothing to accomplish—into every day. This is time to do nothing, free of guilt. Even a few minutes spent in this way can yield a sense of renewal.

Also experiment with decreasing your awareness of time. Leave your watch off for a few hours each day. Spend time in an area that's free of clocks. Notice how often you glance at your watch, and make a conscious effort to do that less often.

If you still want some sense of time, then use alternatives to the almighty, unforgiving clock. Measure your day with a sundial, hourglass, or egg timer. Or synchronize your activities with the rhythms of nature, for example, by rising at dawn. You can also plan activities to harmonize with the rhythms of your body. Schedule your most demanding tasks for times when you're normally most alert. Eat when you're hungry, not according to the clock. Toss out schedules when it's appropriate. Sometimes the best-laid plans are best laid to rest.

Take time to retreat from time. Create a sanctuary, a haven, a safe place in your life that's free from any hint of schedules, lists, or accomplishments. One of the most effective ways to manage time is periodically to forget about it.

