

If you are one of the 80-95% of college students who procrastinate, here are a few strategies that may help.

In general:

Do not compromise your academic integrity

Even in times of high stress, plagiarism is never the answer. Handing in a paper late or a paper that is not your best work is always a better strategy than passing off someone else's work as your own. Professors will always be more understanding about a bad grade than about dishonesty. If you need help citing sources, see the [Writing Studio](#) website or the [Duke University Library](#) website, or use “[ask a librarian](#)” for real-time assistance.

Forgive yourself

Studies show that students who forgive themselves for procrastination tend to procrastinate less in the future. Try to start by forgiving yourself for old bad habits and move forward with the attitude that you can change and procrastinate less.

Prioritize

Procrastinating involves substituting lower priority work for higher priority work. Start by being honest about which projects are more important right now and which ones deserve less of your energy. You may want to look at your schedule and deadlines every week to see what is coming up. A semester-long project may not be a high priority at the beginning of the term when you're still getting introduced to the themes of the course, but by mid-term, it should be a priority to pick a topic and get started on the research.

Specific strategies:

1. Prioritize within a project

With minimal time, you may not have enough time to give equal attention to all parts of the assignment. Try to identify the most important parts and keep the question or prompt in mind while you are writing. A successful paper answers the question at hand, so even if you don't have enough time to make a perfect introduction, try to make sure that you focus your attention on developing a strong claim and pertinent evidence. Try to be realistic that not every assignment can be your best work.

2. Break it down

Breaking up a major research paper can help you realize that you are capable of each step even when the whole thing looks daunting. Set small checkpoints for yourself. When you get a smaller task accomplished, you will feel more hopeful about your progress on the whole.

3. Set goals

a. You may find “timed” goals more helpful than “words typed” goals. For example, consider writing for 45 minutes then take a short break instead of insisting that you’ll stay put until you complete the introduction.

b. Think about what is really important to you to do well in the paper, and focus on doing one thing at a time. For example, set the goal to make sure your analysis is strong. Having a goal can help you remain focused and ultimately develop a stronger paper, even when you don’t have that much time.

4. Plan rewards

When you reach a goal, give yourself a short break or other reward. Consider giving yourself a treat, for example, at the end of every page: get a soda or coffee; text your Mom (then turn your phone back off); play one game of foosball; listen to your favorite song; go for a walk. Just make sure you get back to work. Reliably rewarding yourself can reset your internal dialog to believe that writing won’t take forever, that it won’t ruin your day, and most importantly, that you are in control of your work instead of procrastination being in control of you.

5. Take a new approach

If you are stuck while starting a paper, refer to the Writing Studio resources for creative ways to approach an assignment ([Prewriting](#)). If you try to revise your sentences while trying to get your ideas out, try turning your monitor off while you free-write. Try handwriting instead of typing. Record yourself while explaining the assignment and your ideas about it to a friend. Don't be afraid to try a strategy that is out of your comfort zone—as it might be just what you need!

6. Write the easiest part first

Most writers struggle with getting started; most writers also struggle with writing a strong thesis and introduction off the bat. Instead, get right into the writing that you find easiest by analyzing your research or stating your own ideas. Why did you pick this topic? What is the most interesting thing you found in your research?

7. Write about writing

If you’re really stuck, write for 10 minutes about why you can’t get started on the assignment. You may find a point you need clarified in the prompt, or you may find you have a strong opinion about something that you can use in your thesis.

8. Narrow your topic to end research

For some of us, researching can last far beyond its usefulness; there’s always more to know when you’re approaching a broad topic. After a brief period of research, you should be able to reevaluate and narrow down your topic so that research can end (or at least pause) and writing can begin.

9. Determine your best time for working

If you’re a morning person, schedule some morning work time or a trip to the library. If you work best late in the evening, accept this fact but start working at a comfortable time and be sure start a night before the project is due.

10. Enlist a (reliable) friend or the Writing Studio

Sitting with a studying friend can be helpful, since it can alleviate the feeling that you are the only one working. You can also ask a friend to keep an eye on you so that you don't engage in procrastinating behaviors and that you maintain short breaks. Another fantastic technique is to make a deal (or even a bet!) with a friend that you will both get a certain goal (number of pages, complete draft) accomplished by a certain date. Find someone to be accountable to when setting personal deadlines. Schedule [Writing Studio appointments](#)! We are happy to hold you accountable, and as a bonus we can help you focus on the most profitable areas to tackle next.

11. Find a new place to work

Switching up your workspace might inspire you, or at least might help you feel like you haven't been sitting in the same place all day (or night). Moving to a new setting might also minimize distractions.

12. Minimize distractions

Turn off your phone and your internet, if possible, for the chunk of time you've decided to write. Try a simple text editor instead of a word processor with all the bells and whistles (ex: [Writer](#), a simplified iPad writing application) or a program that cuts off your internet for a specified period of time ([Freedom](#)).

13. Take the time to proofread

Try to save at least 5 minutes per page at the end of your writing to actively proofread for spelling and grammar mistakes. If you have enough time to look over the content and flow, that's great, but if not try to still insure that your paper is formatted correctly and has no sentence level flaws that will make it difficult to read or understand.

If your habits are troubling you and procrastination is getting in the way of your success, make an appointment at the Writing Studio to consult a tutor on long-term strategies for improvement.

Additional Resources

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/procrastination.html>

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/658/01/>

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/prewriting/more_questions.html