

WRITING AND PROCRASTINATION

Procrastination of writing—the unnecessary delaying of writing tasks to the point of discomfort—is a complex behavior that can have a significant impact on academic success. It is also a common challenge that many students face. Despite knowing the importance of starting early and managing time effectively, students often find themselves putting off writing assignments and then feeling the pressure of completing substantial writing tasks with limited time.

REASONS WHY YOU MIGHT THINK YOU PROCRASTINATE

Some writers assume that they procrastinate because they lack self-discipline, or they may tell themselves they are just lazy. On the contrary, when we procrastinate, we often end up engaging in intense, high-stress work as deadlines near; this approach to working requires great self-discipline and motivation, neither of which is a trait associated with laziness.

Others claim they work better and more efficiently under pressure. While it's true that relying on the last-minute rush is a surefire way to fuel productivity, the idea that working in this mode produces *better* work is a false belief because the writing that is turned in at the deadline is essentially a first draft. Furthermore, without having assessed the writing one can produce through a carefully planned writing process (which includes prewriting, drafting, reflecting, and revising), there is no other data from which to draw and no way to be certain that high-pressure conditions produce better writing.

REASONS WHY YOU MIGHT ACTUALLY PROCRASTINATE

If working under pressure doesn't yield optimal results, then why do so many believe that it does? This is mainly because writers who tend to procrastinate find that they can't get started on a task unless their back is to the wall. In other words, apprehensive writers may believe that they work better under the pressure of a deadline because they have determined that that is the only circumstance under which they can *actually start* working. To address this problem, it's important to first understand why some writers depend on a high-pressure circumstance to get started. For many writers, the act of delaying writing is often a result of underlying emotional challenges.

Some root causes of procrastination to consider are:

Escaping Negative Emotions

Procrastination can act as a temporary escape from negative emotions such as anxiety, self-doubt, or feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of a writing assignment. The thought of tackling a large or complex writing project can be intimidating, and by delaying tasks, students avoid

facing these uncomfortable emotions, albeit temporarily. In fact, it's very common for people to begin organizing their surroundings, like a work desk or computer files, when confronted with a largescale or daunting task because smaller, more easily managed tasks provide more immediate gratification while allowing them to feel productive.

Fear of Failure

Writers who feel unsure about their abilities or skill level may procrastinate to avoid confronting feelings of inadequacy. By delaying tasks, they can temporarily avoid the risk of making mistakes or facing potential criticism.

Perfectionism and Unrealistic Expectations

Striving for perfection can also fuel procrastination. Writers may put off starting writing assignments due to the fear of falling short of their own or others' unrealistically high expectations. This fear can lead to delay and avoidance. Setting excessively high standards for oneself can be overwhelming and demotivating, and it disregards a very important part of the learning process, which is the knowledge and skills one develops through each unsuccessful attempt at a new task. Writers who wait to start writing until they come up with a brilliant idea worth writing about may fail to grasp that the early stages of writing are the process that leads to the development of ideas.

PROBLEMS RESULTING FROM PROCRASTINATION

The deadline-motivated approach to writing creates a vicious cycle where the more we procrastinate, the less positive our experiences with writing become, and the more we want to put off working on future writing projects. Even if the work always ultimately gets done, relying on the pressure of a deadline to start working can be detrimental to writers and their output in the following ways:

Increased Stress

Working under pressure triggers a higher level of stress and anxiety. While some stress can be motivating, excessive stress impairs cognitive functioning, decreases focus, and hampers creativity. These are not the moments when you will come up with your best ideas. In addition, this deadline-oriented approach to writing creates a vicious cycle where the more a writer relies high-stress motivators, the less positive their experiences with writing become, and the more they want to put off working on future writing projects.

Reduced Time for Reflection

When working under pressure, there is limited time for reflection. This will negatively affect your critical thinking while brainstorming and drafting, and it can yield rushed and shallow analysis. Working under pressure also leaves little time to engage in thoughtful and deliberate revision—a crucial stage where some of your most outstanding writing can emerge.

Limited Problem-Solving

Time pressure can reduce opportunities for problem-solving (for example, discovering that your thesis doesn't respond to the prompt or that several of your paragraphs are off-topic). Without sufficient time to explore alternative approaches or to seek help from your professor or the Writing Center, you may resort to quick fixes or incomplete solutions that do not fully address the task requirements.

Decreased Learning Opportunities

Working under pressure leaves little room for learning and growth. It limits the opportunity to delve deep into topics, engage in meaningful discussions, and build new knowledge that can be transferred to future assignments. While not every college writing assignment will change your life, some of them might—but these meaningful experiences are most likely to happen when you spend ample time working on a project.

WHAT CAN YOU DO INSTEAD?

Refreshing your state of mind and starting to work in productive ways require identifying the root causes for your procrastination and exchanging the maladaptive coping behaviors for adaptive coping behaviors. The following are some strategies that may help you work through the stresses that can be associated with writing and to avoid procrastinating.

Identify Your Stressors

Start by recognizing the emotions that trigger your procrastination. Are you feeling anxious, fearful, or overwhelmed? Do you feel confused by the assignment or the course material? Do you struggle to meet the page minimum of writing assignments and, consequently, feel stressed when assigned long papers? Identifying these emotions will allow you to address them more effectively. You may also seek support through Caltech's Occupational Therapy Services.

Set Realistic Goals

Break writing tasks down into smaller, more manageable, and more gratifying steps. This helps to alleviate the feeling of being overwhelmed and makes it easier to get started. Set concrete and realistic goals for each step. For example, instead of sitting down to write with no goal in mind, set aside a 30-minute brainstorming session to get started. Keep the objective firm, but not rigid; don't commit to writing a highly structured outline if that is unrealistic for you, and instead focus on jotting down unstructured ideas for your brainstorming. If you're already past the brainstorming stage with ideas in mind, set aside an hour to write whichever paragraphs you feel the most prepared to write, without feeling constrained by structure or organization. Small, defined goals also help you avoid the trap of engaging in other more manageable and gratifying tasks instead of writing.

Give Yourself Permission to Write a Terrible First Draft

All good writing starts with what author Anne Lamott calls “shitty first drafts.” A part of learning to write productively is learning to embrace the reality that writing is *not* about achieving perfection; writing is a tool for discovering what it is you mean to communicate, and your first draft is merely a first attempt at decoding your thoughts and ideas. Remember that your first draft is not intended for evaluation. Allow yourself to write freely, knowing this draft is for your eyes only, and leave yourself time to revise and produce the later drafts that your readers will see.

Start with the Part You Feel Prepared to Write

Creating something out of nothing and getting past the blank screen is one of the biggest hurdles for all writers. Rather than staring at the screen while trying to assemble the perfect first sentence in your head, remember that the first words you write don’t need to be the first sentences of the paper. For writers in the humanities, this may mean starting by writing textual analysis and temporarily setting aside difficult questions about what your argument will be. For writers in STEM fields, it may be easiest to start by writing the methods and results, which often feel easier to write than the introduction and discussion.

Establish Accountability and Make Writing a Social Enterprise

Share your writing goals and progress with a peer, mentor, or someone in the Hixon Writing Center. The Writing Specialists in the HWC are especially helpful for breaking down writing prompts and posing questions during brainstorming sessions to help you expand and refine your ideas. You do not need to wait until you have a complete draft to seek support. Regular check-ins and constructive feedback can be encouraging and can motivate you to stay on track.

Talk to Your Professors

If you’re intimidated by the prospect of having your writing evaluated by your professors, speak with them one-on-one about your work and your concerns. These conversations may make it easier to share working drafts with your professor (something many professors invite students to do) before producing a final draft.

FINAL TAKEAWAY

Overcoming perfectionism, fear of failure, and other emotional obstacles takes time and practice. Be patient with yourself as you develop new writing habits and perspectives. By understanding your reasons for procrastinating on writing assignments and implementing practical techniques to manage your response to writing challenges, you can develop a productive writing routine.

Works Consulted

We consulted a number of works on this topic to create this handout, and you'll find their references here. This is not an exhaustive list of all resources on this topic, and we encourage you to seek out additional resources as needed.

Burka, Jane B., and Lenora M. Yuen. *Procrastination : Why You Do It, What to Do About It Now*. Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2008.

Voge, Dominic. "Classroom Resources for Addressing Procrastination." *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2007, pp. 88–96.

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