

## 2. Organising your studies

This chapter explains why it is a good idea to keep your study efforts organized and focused, and outlines how to do so. We will discuss time as a factor contributing to stress, introduce the basic principles of time management, and identify common “time eaters” that represent a major hindrance to using one’s time effectively. We will also discuss how time-planning tools can help you organise your life at university.

### Study material

## 2 Organising your studies

### 2.1 Why get organised?

Some people are natural-born students. They clearly demonstrate a devotion to learning, they learn fast, and things seem to come to them as if by a sixth sense or a special power. In reality, however, such students are quite rare. Many young people enter the university unprepared for the challenges and expectations outlined in the introductory chapter.

As a result, more often than not, they find themselves under considerable stress or in a state of despair resulting from the many pressures of the academic environment. Common university **stressors** include:

- lack of time,
- feeling of inadequacy,
- fear of failure,
- academic overload,
- in-class competition,
- bad relationships with staff or fellow students,
- homesickness,
- financial problems.

To prevent stress, it is necessary to get organised.

### 2.2 Time management basics

Time is an important factor for human beings. A significant amount of stress in life originates from a perceived lack of time; in fact, some of the “academic stressors” mentioned above are more closely related to time constraints than to any other factor. For example, the feeling of overload in students often stems from poor time management rather than from having too much work to do. Also, students are afraid of failure, not because they are slow-witted, but because they feel that they have not spent enough time preparing for exams.

In this [study material](#), we will give you a few general tips on how to organise your time at the university. If you want to delve deeper, we encourage you to read one of the many books on

time management and planning. The bibliography at the end of this material will be your guide.

### 2.2.1 Time eaters

The first thing you should do is identify your **time eaters**: things that waste your time, destroy your productivity, slow down your progress, and deprive you of energy for work or study. While it is true that people often mention the same time eaters when asked, the actual degree to which they consume one's precious time can be highly individual. Some obvious time eaters include:

- **social networks** (how many times have you taken a break to read something on Facebook, only to find yourself still scrolling through the news feed an hour later?)
- **computer games** (they can be incredibly immersive: some people apparently play them for days, if not weeks on end)
- **web surfing** (it's easy to lose your sense of time on the Internet: imagine visiting a street market that has *everything*!)
- the **television** (despite losing a lot of ground in recent years due to pressure from new media, some people still consider flipping between 100 channels a pastime worth their while)
- **commuting** (we regularly waste considerable amounts of time on our way to work or school)

Sometimes eaters are less conspicuous, and people often do not realize they might cause a problem:

- lack of self-discipline
- lack of priorities
- aimlessness, lack of plan
- inability to say no

### 2.2.2 Time-planning tools

We live in an information age; we produce, seek, and consume information every day. In such a setting, it has become clear that the human brain – highly sophisticated as it may be – is no longer capable of absorbing such a vast amount of information. Many people struggle to remember the birthdays of their loved ones, let alone the dates of their appointments, exams, and deadlines.

Apart from the learning content, university studies impose on you a great number of dates and times to remember. It is highly recommended that you use a modern tool to keep track of your assignments, tasks, submission deadlines, exam dates, and other events. A traditional diary is not very suitable, not because it would quite likely look uncool to your fellow students, but because it would become yet another thing to put in your bag. What you need is a software application that runs on your smartphone, tablet, or laptop: something you carry with you every day.

Applications designed to organise your working life are referred to as **personal information managers** (PIMs). They very often take the form of integrated solutions that include:

- an **e-mail client** (which you can configure to use your personal as well as your university e-mail account from a single place);
- a **to-do list** (to keep track of tasks to complete within a specific time);
- a **calendar** (for various events: regular or irregular);
- a **contact manager** (to store and edit your contacts).

Popular PIM solutions include Microsoft Outlook, Mozilla Thunderbird (with the Lightning extension), EssentialPIM, and Google Calendar.

### 2.2.3 The bigger picture

Do not live for the day: always have a clear understanding of what's to come in your university life!

Early on in your first year, have a look at the complete curriculum for your degree programme to see how many courses you will have to take each semester. The first few semesters will likely be quite busy, with some heavy lifting to be done in courses that represent the core of your programme. Do not slacken your efforts until you have the main, required courses off your back.

At the beginning of each academic year, download or pick up a copy of your faculty's calendar to see how the year is going to be organised. Transfer all important dates and deadlines into your PIM application.

At some point, you may be allowed to study abroad as part of a student exchange programme (such as Erasmus+). If you consider spending a semester or even a whole year on such a programme, make sure that your stay abroad does not complicate your studies at home.

### 2.2.4 Operational planning

During the semester, keep your PIM busy. Inform it of all your study obligations: tests, papers, projects, readings, coursework submission deadlines, and exams. Also, make plans for holidays, breaks, part-time jobs, etc.

Make sure that you set **reminders** for all key deadlines and events. This way, the PIM application will continue to remind you that an important date is approaching.

It can be very frustrating when there is a lot of work to do within a relatively short timeframe. Go through the individual tasks and assign priorities, starting with the most pressing or difficult ones. These are the tasks to begin with.

More heads are better than one. With your fellow students, establish a way to inform each other about important school matters. A good idea is to set up a closed group on social media (such as Facebook) to remind the members of assignments and upcoming deadlines.

## Comprehension check

1. In what way does *time* work as a factor contributing to stress? Give more than one example.
2. Can you name three common *time eaters* that are not related to technology?
3. Where will you find information about the organisation of the academic year at your university?

## Task

Determine how many hours **a week** you spend doing the following activities:

Activity	Hours spent weekly
Sleeping and relaxation	
Personal care	
Shopping	
Meal preparation & eating	
Socializing, visiting people	
Online communication, using social media	
Watching TV or videos	
Computer games / other hobbies	
Sports & exercise	
Commuting to school	
Part-time work	
In-class and online learning	
Doing homework, reading for school	

- Which of the activities take up the most of your time?
- Do they bring any real benefit to your life and study, or have you just identified some of your potential time eaters?