

Dividing big jobs into smaller sub-tasks helps to bring work under control, allows you to set targets and check your progress. There is so much pressure to be ambitious – to go for the long dissertation, to read the huge tomes. Yet achievement arises out of quite modest activities undertaken on a small scale. The trouble with the big tasks is that you keep putting them off. Their scope and shape is unclear and we all flee from uncertainty. The more you can define your work as small, discrete, concrete tasks, the more control you have over it.

Organising tasks into the time available can itself be divided into strategy and application. It is useful to think of yourself as “investing” time. Some tasks require intense concentration and need to be done at a prime time of day, when you are at your best and have time to spare. Others can be fitted in when you are tired, or as “warm-up” activities at the start of a session. Some, such as essay writing, may best be spread over several days. Some need to be done straight away.

There are few reliable guidelines. Essentially you have to keep circling round a self-monitoring loop: plan an approach to a task, try it out, reflect afterwards on your success in achieving what you intended and then revise your strategy.

Once you start to think strategically, you begin to take control of your studies rather than letting them swamp you.

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