



PROCRASTINATION:

What it is.

Why we do it.

What we can do about it.



Effective Learning Service

Procrastination

Do not put your work off till to-morrow and the day after; for a sluggish worker does not fill his barn, nor one who puts off his work: industry makes work go well, but a man who puts off work is always at hand-grips with ruin.

(Hesiod, circa 800 BC: in *Works and Days*: l:413)

Procrastination is the deferment or avoidance, without good reason, of an intended or scheduled task until later. The word has its origins in latin: *pro-* (forward) and *crastinus* (of tomorrow).

As you can see from the boxed text above, the concern with procrastination is not a modern phenomenon. However, in modern times when many people are faced with multiple tasks that need to be accomplished within a regulated and often short period of time, it is not surprising the attention that is now given to the topic.

Is all procrastination a bad thing?

There are negative connotations attached to the word, but it is important to remember that not all deferment of action is bad. Sometimes procrastination is the wise and positive choice: in the case of war, for example, or any other situation when the outcome of an action is unpredictable and might even be harmful to others.

It can also be seen as a useful personal 'rebellion' against the unquestioning acceptance of task upon task that may unthinkingly be piled on us from all sides. It can be an opportunity to think about the range of tasks that we face, and whether they are all necessary, or really need to be accomplished in the time frames set for us by others.

In an academic context, some students deliberately leave course work tasks to the last minute, arguing that the resulting pressure makes them concentrate and gives them the 'buzz' they need to produce consistently good work (Revelle 1997). If it has the desired effect, then that is fine.

However, if deferment or avoidance of required tasks is not producing the desired result, and is leading to negative repercussions for you and others, then procrastination of action to resolve the situation is unwise!

Academic procrastination

In an academic context it appears to affect a great number of students. Self-reporting by students suggest that 80-95 per cent engage in procrastination of some sort (Ellis and Knaus, 1977; O'Brien, 2002), and almost 50 per cent procrastinate consistently, which leads to problems with assignments or other set tasks (Day, Mensink, and O'Sullivan, 2000; Haycock, 1993; Onwuegbuzie, 2000).

A common form of procrastination is for students to delay starting an assignment beyond a scheduled start time and then have to work furiously to finish it on time. In some cases, a time extension has then to be sought, although institutions usually only allow this in exceptional cases.

Causes

The causes of procrastination are complex and as yet far from being fully understood. However, a recent paper by Steele (2007) summarised his review of several hundred academic studies of procrastination, dating from the 1930s onwards, in an attempt to identify the cause, effect, and possible remedies for it.

There appears to be four factors at work relating to:

1. Importance or value of set task to an individual
2. Desirability, or attractiveness, of the set task to individual



3. Proneness of person to procrastination (see pages 5-7)
4. Time available to do the set task

These relate and connect with each other. Items 1 and 3 are balanced against items 4 and 5.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Low										High

Each of the four items can be given a rating against a task, and the following quadrant represents the best outcomes that can be achieved within these conflicting factors.

if items 1 to 3 are set on a 'high' priority scale setting, with 4 and 5 on 'low', then this, in theory anyway, is likely to reduce the risk of procrastination.

High (value)	Low	
Importance or value of set task to an individual Desirability, or attractiveness, of the set task to individual	Proneness of person to procrastination (generally less inclined to procrastination) Time available to do the set task (is short)	=
		Less risk of procrastination
Low (value)	High	
Importance or value of set task to an individual Desirability, or attractiveness, of the set task to individual	Proneness of person to procrastination: (generally more inclined to procrastination) Time available to do the set task (is greater)	=
		Higher risk of procrastination

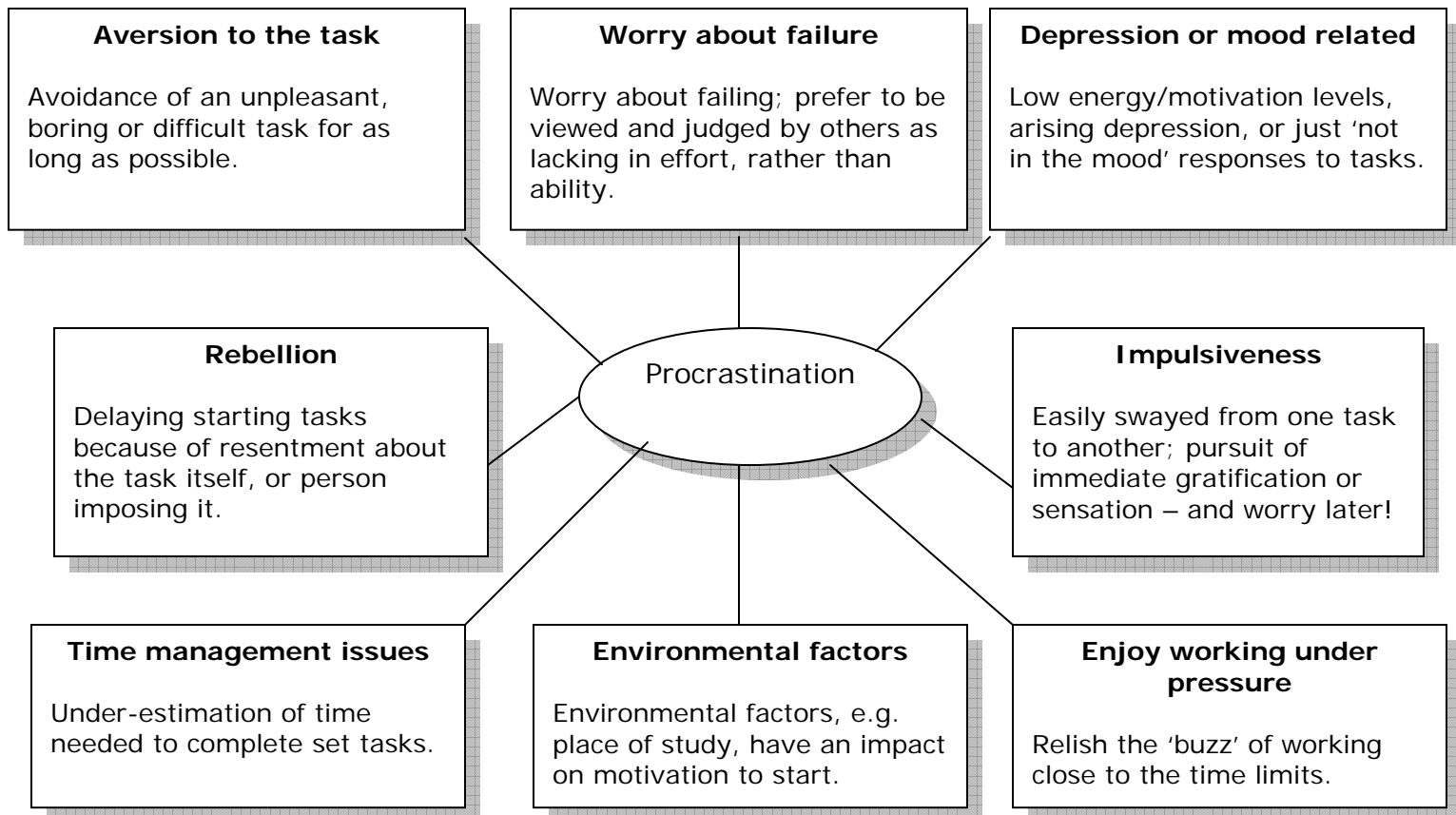
Although this model is generally applicable, it is still apparent that the high proneness of an individual to procrastination can outweigh the high value set on tasks. A case, perhaps, of: *"...the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak"* (Matthew 26:41)

When this happens, this situation is likely to be the cause of significant frustration to the individuals concerned, as they realise the value of the tasks but still find it difficult to overcome their tendencies to procrastination.

For this reason, attention in research over recent years has focused more on the individual reasons for this trait.

Proneness to procrastination

Steele's (2007) survey has suggested that the following factors can impact on individual response to task procrastination:



More detail on each item:

1. Aversion to the task

Some academic procrastination is linked to avoidance of an unpleasant task. The student may well have the ability, but not the inclination, to pursue a particular task that holds little interest for him or her. The inclination to do this is in proportion to the importance of the task to overall success and failure on a course. So if an assignment is not vital to the overall result, the more likelihood that procrastination will occur. In this situation both the incentives and rewards are weak.

2. Worry about failure

One of the main commentators on procrastination, Joseph Ferrari, argues that this tendency is linked to self-doubt: [these students]"... *are very concerned with what others think of them; they would rather have others think they lack effort than ability*" (Ferrari, quoted by Merrano 2003).

3. Depression or mood related

This relates to 'mood', or in some cases, depression - which is a more serious condition. In relation to mood, a typical response might be "*I'm just not in the mood now, but will be later*". This happens to us all, and is only a problem if it becomes a regular response to any situation and conceals other life factors that you need to address. Depression, however, is a more significant issue, as this condition can physically lower one's interest and response to any activity.

4. Rebellion

As stated earlier, procrastination can be a response to a situation where you are given tasks that you feel are unfair, unnecessary, or presented in too great a number at any one time. This might be an occasional and localised 'rebellion', or it may have formed a part of the procrastinator's general response to task allocated situations, particularly in the home. Ferrari, for example, argues that having an over-controlling parent can keep children from:

...developing the ability to regulate themselves, from internalizing their own intentions and then learning to act on them. Procrastination can ... be a form of rebellion, one of the few forms available under such circumstances. What's more, under those household conditions, procrastinators turn more to friends than to parents for support, and their friends may reinforce procrastination because they tend to be tolerant of their excuses (Ferrari, quoted by Merrano 2003).

5. Time management issues

This is the most likely explanation for procrastination in an academic setting, particularly with students who are returning to formal education after a fairly lengthy break. They may use a mental benchmark for measuring the time that served them well in the workplace – but one that proves unsatisfactory to gauge the time needed to complete academic tasks. They consequently underestimate the time it takes to complete academic tasks, and defer starting work because of this lack of contextual time management experience. Studying in a second language adds another time dimension to the equation for international students.

6. Impulsiveness and distraction

Blatt and Quinn (1967) have argued that impulsive people may be more likely to procrastinate, as they are more occupied with desires of the moment, rather than those of the future, and so focus their attention upon immediate concerns and immediate gratification. In an academic context, as they start one task, typically other issues crowd in around them and begin to offer alternative immediate distractions. The stronger the attraction, the greater is the risk of distraction.

7. Environmental factors

There is some interesting research that links place of study to procrastination. Onwuegbuzie and Jiao (2000), for example, studied the learning environment of 135 graduate students and found some relationship between procrastination and studying in a library, for some students. This tended to be because the majority of these reported difficulties in locating information.

But some students felt overwhelmed by the amount of information surrounding them, and felt they should be reading more than the solitary selected source. Or, the search for additional reading became a procrastination tactic for delaying reading the items they had already selected.

Study within a hall of residence is also likely to offer continual distraction, including neighbours who make excessive noise or who offer you more tempting and gratifying opportunities to spend time!

8. Enjoy working under pressure?

Steele (2007) found some evidence that some students enjoyed the buzz of adrenaline they gained from working under pressure, and who may intentionally put off work in order to feel the tension of working close to a deadline. As stated earlier, this practice can only be regarded as negative if the tendency to do this becomes addictive and the results gained from this approach to work are consistently poor.

Nature or nurture?

What is not clear is if chronic procrastinators born or made. Joseph Ferrari, believes that procrastination are made by family influence. This might be by imitation of parental behaviour – or because of rebellion against an over-controlling parent or parents who pressure their children to complete tasks to their agendas and timetable (Ferrari et al 1995). However, some commentators see a link between procrastination and inherited traits, such as a tendency to anxiety (see Burka and Yuen, 1984).

So what can you do about it?

This is the hard bit. Diagnosis of the problem is relatively easy, but the 'cure' takes more effort, and will not be successful unless you are committed to change.

However, it makes sense to look at the four causal dimensions again and use these as our starting point:

1. Importance or value of set task to an individual
2. Desirability, or attractiveness, of the set task to individual
3. Proneness to procrastination
4. Time available to do the set task

1. Importance or value of set task to an individual

In an academic context, for most students, the value of the set task will be in the outcome (reward), in terms of grades, awards and career goals.

However, these goals are relatively long term, and what may be needed is to increase the range of short term **rewards** for keeping to a set task. If you are inclined to procrastination, and even if you are not, do not underestimate the impact of working toward a reward you set yourself for completing a sustained and uninterrupted period of work.



The reward system can also be made to work more effectively if others are involved in the pay-off. If you promise, for example, your partner, spouse, or friends a part or share in the reward, then this can build in the element of commitment to others. If you let yourself down, you let others down, too.

2. Desirability, or attractiveness, of the set task to individual

One of the key factors here is the fact that most students read and revise in isolation. Lectures and tutorials help to reduce the isolation, but the student is often left to work independently.

This can be a problem sometimes, particularly if you are struggling to understand a difficult subject that holds little appeal. Failure to grasp a point, or difficulties in unravelling the academic language of some text books can lead to frustration, and temptation to abandon a particular study period for a more rewarding short-term experience.

Working in a **study group** can be a way forward; students help each to learn. The study group agrees to meet on a regular basis to discuss work. This might involve going over a subject together, revising the main points from a lecture or tutorial, or agreeing to all read and discuss a chapter or article from a set book or journal. Setting each other quizzes has been found to produce good results among study groups, as this benefits both the quiz-setter (who has to learn the right answers), and the other quiz participants.



There is research to suggest (see Hartley 1998) that this form of collective learning can lead to better grades. This would appear to relate to the learning process involved. Explaining an idea to another person makes you concentrate on the topic and choose your words carefully to express the right meaning. There may be a slight competitive element involved too, in that you don't want to lose face in a group, so you concentrate a bit harder. Both these factors can reinforce learning.

You can also look at ways of keeping your **motivation** high with a subject. It is particularly difficult to maintain interest in abstract information when motivation is low, and the challenge for the student in this situation is to actively seek a personal engagement with the material.



Here are some approaches that you could try:

You will learn better and make any subject more interesting if you ask yourself: "*How can I use this idea? What personal significance can I find in this for me?*"

- Reflect on **why** you find some subjects or learning situations difficult. You will probably find this connects with past negative experiences. Once you are closer to understanding the reasons, you can begin to change the way you perceive it. If you have negative memories from the past of a particular subject, you may still feel negatively about it today. But you can change the way you perceive the situation – you do not **have** to feel bad about it now. The past is the past, now is now.
- Think about the reasons behind the development of the idea, theory or practice – why did it appear on the scene; what is the history behind it?
- If you had to summarise the main points of a particular theory, idea or practice for a group of people who knew nothing of the subject, what would you say?

3. Proneness to procrastination

The approaches to reducing procrastination presented so far can be tried for most of the procrastination tendencies summarised earlier.

However, **depression related** procrastination is a significant condition, but can respond to medical or therapeutic intervention. This can include counselling, and this is often the best way out of this situation for sufferers. The University Counselling Service offers confidential individual help and support, plus a range of useful booklets and leaflets.

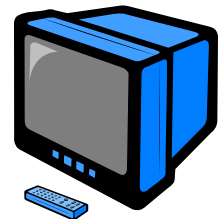
Regarding **environmental factors**, this can be quite an important issue in reducing procrastination. For many students, the library is undoubtedly the best place for study. Issues about not knowing where to find information (see Onwuegbuzie and Jiao, 2000, p.7) can be overcome by asking the staff, and it is obviously designated as a place of independent learning.

However, the quiet that should prevail in the library can be spoiled occasionally by the noise of students who are using the space to socialize with others.

If you are finding that the library offers you too many opportunities for social distraction, you need to think about where you can go to take yourself deliberately away from temptation.

There are occasionally empty seminar rooms free during the day at the School of Management and the receptionist at Emm Lane or Heaton Mount can tell you which are free, and when the rooms are vacant.

If you are rather **impulsive** and easily bored by sticking too long at one task, you might benefit from a mixture of reading and listening and watching, so that you engage more than one of your senses. The library contains not just books and journals, but audio/visual forms of learning (tapes, DVDs, VHS), so it is worth planning an independent study period around a **mixture** of learning sources so you are stimulated by more than one form of learning.



You can also **reduce the opportunities** for impulsive distraction. For example, if you are using a PC and an e-mail or internet icon is perpetually within your field of vision, there is a continual reminder of opportunities for chat room or other distractions.

Simply making the e-mail and other icons less visible on your PC can reduce the opportunities for this type of procrastination by distraction.

Other approaches that might work for the **impulsive procrastinator**:

- **Start with the unpleasant tasks first** – get them out of the way early. You can then enjoy the more interesting tasks.
- **Set yourself a short time limit for reading**: 40 – 45 minutes tends to be the maximum time most people can read before their concentration slips. At the end of the set time, stop and take a break. The relatively short time you set yourself for reading at any one stretch can help concentrate your mind.
- **Combine short bursts of reading, with active reading**: when you read, make notes of the key ideas or points. Continually looking for main points in any paragraph and highlighting or summarising them in your own words, will help keep your mind focused.

4. Time management issues

Students may regard themselves as good time managers, but, as stated earlier, may be using a benchmark that was relevant for their workplace, but which proves unsatisfactory for academic study: when tasks often take longer than you think to accomplish. As a general rule for assignment writing, allow yourself more time than you think you need, and particularly for tasks that can sometimes take longer than you think – like checking references, and formatting text.

Steele's survey also suggests goal setting is an important contributor to reduce procrastination. The goals can be set by an individual, but are inclined to be more effective when set by other people, e.g. a study group, or by a personal tutor. Tucker-Ladd (2007) argues that *"...for perhaps a third of all student procrastinators, a 'To-Be-Done List', a daily schedule and a simple record-keeping and reward procedure will do wonders"*.

This can be a simple reminder, as shown on the next page, that you can easily design yourself, or the Effective Learning Officer can give you a printed **'Get a Grip on Time'** poster to use.

A short term time planner does, however, need to be set within the framework of longer term planning for the semester, or full academic year.

The number of daily tasks scheduled should be **manageable** for any one day otherwise you will inevitably get stressed. Be fair to yourself – don't give yourself more daily tasks than you can realistically manage.

TO DO TODAY

Last word

Sometimes the best advice is the least interesting. This is no exception. It is too easy sometimes to think there is a 'six-easy-steps' approach to solving all life problems. The fact is that procrastination is a bad habit for a lot of people. And to change any bad habit, you have to **seriously** want to - and be prepared to change your behaviour. This booklet has offered some advice to lubricate the transition to change, but if you are only half-hearted about the challenge, you will not make it. If you want to procrastinate less – start now!

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