



# 21 Ways to Get the Most Out of Now

The following 21 time management techniques are about when to study, where to study, how to handle the rest of the world and things you can ask yourself when you get stuck. As you read, underline, circle or otherwise note the suggestions you think you can use.

Pick two or three techniques to use now. When they become habits and you do them automatically, come back to this article and pick up a couple more.

## WHEN TO STUDY

**1. Plan two hours study time for every hour you spend in class.** There are exceptions, but this is a good general rule. It's also one that few students follow. Students making the transition from high school to higher education are often unaware that more is expected of them. If you are taking 15 credit hours, plan to spend 30 hours per week studying. The benefits of following this rule will be apparent at exam time.

**2. Study difficult (or boring) tasks first.** If your chemistry problems put you to sleep, get to them first, while you are fresh. Most of us tend to do what we like first, yet the courses we find most difficult often require the most creative energy. Save the subjects you enjoy for later. If you find yourself avoiding a particular subject, you might get up an hour early to study it before breakfast. With that chore out of the way, the rest of the day will be a breeze. (If you discover that you continually avoid a subject, that course might be a potential trouble area. Take a look at the circumstances of this behaviour.)

**3. Avoid scheduling marathon study sessions.** When possible, study in short sessions. Three three-hour sessions are far more productive for most people than one nine-hour session. In a nine- or ten-hour study marathon the actual time on task can be depressingly small. With 10 hours of study ahead of you, the temptation is to tell yourself, "Well, it's going to be a *long* day. No sense getting in a rush. Better sharpen about a dozen of these pencils and change the lightbulbs." In the 10-hour sitting you might spend only six or seven hours studying,

whereas three shorter sessions might yield as much as eight hours of productive time.

When you do study in long sessions, take a planned break every hour. Focus your attention for short periods, then give your brain a chance to take a break.

Finally, if you must study in a large block of time, work on several subjects and avoid studying similar subjects back to back. For example, if you plan to study sociology, psychology and computer science, sandwich the computer course between psychology and sociology.

**4. Be aware of your best time of day.** Many people learn best in daylight hours. Observe yourself, and if this is true for you, schedule study time for your most difficult subjects when the sun is up.

Many successful business people begin their day at 5am (or earlier!) while most of us are still asleep. Athletes and yogis use this time, too. Some writers complete their best work before 9am.

Unless you grew up on a farm, the idea of being conscious at 4am might seem ridiculous. Getting up that early is like jumping in an icy mountain lake. After the initial shock, your body comes alive.

Very early morning is a beautiful time. The world is quiet. Inner voices are less insistent. Spiritual leaders of all persuasions have recommended predawn as a time of meditation and prayer. The mind is better able to focus before it is assaulted by the jangle of telephones, traffic and top forty tunes.

If you aren't convinced to use this technique regularly, test it when you're in a time crunch. Even if it doesn't work for you, you might get to see a sunrise.

The key point is to determine your best learning time. If early morning doesn't work for you, find out what time is better.

**5. Use waiting time.** Five minutes waiting for a bus, 20 minutes waiting for the dentist, 10 minutes between classes – waiting time adds up fast. Have short study tasks ready to do during these times. For example, you can carry 3x5 cards with equations, formulas or definitions and pull them out anywhere. Also, use time between classes or breaks during work to review class notes or notes on reading. A solid review of a lecture can be completed in 15 minutes, and even five minutes can be valuable if you are prepared.

## WHERE TO STUDY

**6. Use a regular study area.** Your body knows where you are. When you see the same place to study, day after day, your body becomes trained. When you arrive at that particular place, it will automatically sense that it's time to study. You will focus your concentration more quickly. For that reason, don't sleep or eat where you study. Just as you train your body to be alert at your desk, you also train it to slow down near your bed. Don't eat where you study. Don't watch television where you study. Use your study area for study and make it a ritual.

**7. Don't get too comfortable.** In bed, your body gets a signal. For most students, it's likely to be, "Time to sleep," rather than "Time to study!" Learning requires energy, so give your body a message that energy is needed. Put yourself in a situation that supports that message.

**8. Use a library.** Libraries are designed for learning. The lighting is perfect. The noise level is low. Materials are available. Entering a library is a signal to your body to quiet the mind and get to work. Most people can get more done in a shorter time at a library. Experiment for yourself.

## HOW TO HANDLE THE REST OF THE WORLD

**9. Pay attention to your attention.** Breaks in concentration are often caused by internal interruptions; your own thoughts jumping in to tell you another story about the world. When

that happens, notice the thoughts and let them go.

**10. Agree with living mates about study time.** This includes roommates, wives, husbands and kids. Make the rules clear, and be sure to follow them yourself. Make explicit agreements- even written contracts. One student always wears a colourful hat when he wants to study. When his wife and children see the hat, they respect his wish to be left alone.

**11. Avoid noise distractions.** Don't study in front of the TV. Turn off the stereo. Many students insist that they study better with music, and that may be true. Some students have reported good results with carefully selected and controlled music. The overwhelming majority of research indicates that silence is the best form of music for study.

**12. Notice how others misuse your time.** Be aware of repeat offenders. Ask yourself if there are certain friends or relatives who consistently interrupt your study time. If avoiding the interrupter is impractical, send a clear message. Sometimes others don't realise they are breaking your concentration. A gentle reminder should do it. If your message doesn't work, there are ways to make it more effective.

**13. Get off the phone.** The telephone is the perfect interrupter. People who wouldn't think of distracting you when you are busy will call at the worst times because they can't see you. For your part, it is easy to rationalise interrupting your study for a phone call. After all, it wasn't your fault the phone rang, and besides, you don't want to be rude.

You don't have to be a telephone victim. If a simple, "I can't talk, I'm studying" doesn't work, use dead silence. It's a conversation killer. Or, short circuit the whole problem: You are unlikely to receive phone calls at the library.

If you assume that you are responsible for all the telephone calls you receive, you take control of the situation.

**14. Learn to say no.** This is a valuable timesaver for students, and a valuable life skill. Many people feel it is rude to refuse a request. Saying no can be done effectively and courteously. Others want you to

succeed as a student. When you tell them that you are busy educating yourself, 99% will understand.

**15. Hang a “do not disturb” sign on your door.** Many hotels will give you one free, just for advertising. Or you can make a creative one. They work. Using one will relieve you of making a decision about cutting off each interruption – a timesaver in itself.

## **THINGS YOU CAN ASK YOURSELF WHEN YOU GET STUCK**

**16. Ask: What is one task I can accomplish toward my goal?** This is a good technique to use on big, imposing jobs. Pick out one small accomplishment, preferably one you can complete in about five minutes, then do it. The satisfaction of getting one thing done often spurs you on to get one more thing done. Meanwhile the job gets smaller.

**17. Ask: Am I beating myself up?** When you get frustrated with a reading assignment or when you notice that your attention wanders repeatedly or when you fall behind on problems due for tomorrow, take a minute to ask yourself how you feel about it. Are you scolding yourself too harshly? Lighten up. Allow yourself to feel a little foolish, recognise the feeling, and get on with it. Don't add to the problem by berating yourself.

**18. Ask: Is this a piano?** Carpenters who build rough frames for buildings have a saying they use when they bend a nail or hack a chunk out of a two-by-four. They say, “Well, this ain't no piano.” It means perfection is not necessary.

Ask yourself if what you are doing needs to be perfect. You don't have to apply the same standards of grammar to review notes that you apply to a term paper. The basketball player who refuses to shoot until the perfect shot is available may never shoot. If you can complete a job 95 percent perfect in two hours, and 100 percent perfect in four hours, ask yourself whether the additional five percent improvement is worth doubling the amount of time you spend.

Sometimes it is a piano. A tiny mistake can ruin an entire lab experiment. Computers are notorious for turning little errors into monsters.

Accept lower standards where appropriate, especially where time is short.

### **19. Ask: How did I just waste time?**

Notice when time passes and you haven't accomplished what you planned. Take a minute to review your actions and note the specific way you wasted time in the same ways over and over again. When you have noticed things you do that kill your time, you are more likely to catch yourself in the act next time. Observing one small quirk may save you hours.

### **20. Ask: Would I pay myself for what I'm doing right now?**

If you were employed as a student, would you be earning your wages? Ask yourself this question when you notice that you've taken your third popcorn break in 30 minutes. Most students are, in fact, employed as students. They are investing in their own productivity, and sometimes don't realise what a mediocre job may cost them.

### **21. Ask: Can I do just one more thing?**

Ask yourself this question at the end of a long day. Almost always you may have enough energy to do just one more short task. If you get into the habit of working until you are done, then doing one more thing, those end-of-day tasks will soon add up. The overall increase in your productivity will surprise you.

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## **Exercise #5**

### **The roaring lion**

Use this exercise to take a break and relax during long study sessions.

1. Draw in a deep breath: then exhale hard through your mouth.
2. As you force your breath out, open your eyes wide and stick out your tongue.
3. Spread your fingers apart and stretch your arms downward.
4. Hold your breath for a few seconds.
5. With your mouth closed, inhale deeply through your nostrils. Allow your abdomen to rise.
6. Breathe out slowly through your nostrils. Relax.

Repeat three times. Try it once now.

## STUDYING WITH CHILDREN UNDERFOOT

Studying with young children in the house presents interesting challenges. It *is* possible to combine effective study time and quality time with children. Make the activity called “study” a game and have them join in.

Studying chemistry with a three-year-old is not as preposterous as it sounds. The secret is to choose the kind of studying that the child can participate in. For instance, use this time to recite. While studying chemistry, make funny faces as you say the properties of the transition elements in the periodic table. Talk in a weird voice as you repeat Faraday’s Laws. Draw pictures and make an exciting story about the process of titration. Use kids as an audience for a speech or for practicing any mnemonic device. If you have invented rhymes, poems or songs to help you remember formulas or dates, children can learn them right along with you. Kids are attracted to energy, enthusiasm and love. To them, the content of the conversation is less important.

The attention span of a young child may range from several seconds to maybe 30 minutes. Do not plan to read new and complex material in the presence of a conscious two-year-old. Most people require about twenty uninterrupted minutes to acclimate their brains to complicated reading assignments. Chances are a toddler will interrupt long before then. Instead, choose short review tasks, like going over previous class notes. You can set up the child with her own desk, just like yours, and even offer rewards for getting her “assignment” done. While she colours, you can work on your notes.

Tell the child how important studying is to you and how you appreciate her cooperation. Reward her with attention and praise when she is quiet. When they are included in the process, children are less likely to resent schoolwork as something that takes you away from them. Rather, it becomes something you do together.

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### Journal entry #13

1. Spend five minutes brainstorming ways in which you waste time. Write down everything that comes to mind. Be sure to limit yourself to five minutes.

2. Take a few minutes to think about your list. Pick two time wasting habits that you use most, and write a note to yourself about why these time wasters are so attractive to you. Write about the payoff for using them. Then write down what the cost is. Do this as if you were writing a note to someone else, and write it to yourself.

3. Take a few minutes to review your list from step one above and write down three time wasters that you are willing to give up.

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Extracted from “Becoming a Master Student” By David Ellis