**How to Stop Procrastinating: A Guide for People Who Want to Overcome Procrastination and Start Getting Things Done**

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If you’re reading this, you’re probably struggling with procrastination in some form. Whether your procrastination is a minor issue that’s simply hurting your productivity, or a major issue that’s preventing you from achieving your goals, you’ve probably tried to overcome your procrastination on your own before and seen that this can be difficult to do.

While reading, keep this in mind: procrastination is a tough issue to handle, but if you take the necessary time to read this guide and formulate a valid plan of action, and if you then follow through on this plan, you *will* have an excellent chance at overcoming or reducing your procrastination.

**A brief introduction to procrastination**

***Procrastination* is the act of unnecessarily postponing decisions or actions.**

If you struggle with procrastination, know that you’re not alone; procrastination is a widespread phenomenon. Around 20% of the adult population and 50% of the student population say that they procrastinate in a serious and chronic manner. Even people who aren’t chronic procrastinators still struggle with procrastination from time to time, and suffer from it to various degrees in their everyday life.

**Why we procrastinate**

If you’re a procrastinator, you’ve probably asked yourself some variation of the following question in the past:

*“Why do I keep procrastinating even though I know that it’s bad for me and even though I want to stop?”*

People often assume that they procrastinate simply as a result of laziness or a lack of willpower, but the real answer is much more complex. It pertains to the cognitive mechanisms that we use in order to self-regulate our behavior in our attempts to bring ourselves to take action that is in our best interest.

In short, when we need to perform a certain task, we usually rely on our *self-control* in order to get ourselves to do so. Furthermore, our *motivation*, which is based on the desire for some reward which we will receive as a result of completing that task, can provide a helpful boost to our self-control, which helps us act in a timely manner.

However, there are various *demotivating factors*, such as anxiety or fear of failure, that have the opposite effect of motivation. These can make us more likely to postpone our tasks unnecessarily, instead of getting them done in a timely manner. There are also various *hindering factors*, such as mental exhaustion or distracting environments that interfere with our self-control and motivation directly, in a way that also makes us more likely to procrastinate.

Whenever these demotivating and hindering factors outweigh our self-control and motivation, we end up procrastinating. We then have to wait until the balance between them shifts back in our favor before we can get started on our work, which can sometimes take a very long time. However, by using the right techniques, it’s possible to actively shift this balance in your favor, sooner rather than later. This will allow you to take control of your life and enable you to get your work done when you want to, rather than when your procrastination says you can.

**How to stop procrastinating**

In order to stop procrastinating, you first need to set your goals, then identify how procrastination will prevent you from achieving them. Next, you need to create a plan of action based on this information, and then implement this plan, refining it as you go along. In the following sections, you will learn more about each of these steps, so that you will be able to use this approach as effectively as possible.

### **Set your goals**

The first step to overcoming your procrastination is to set your goals. These goals should be *clear*, *achievable*, and *meaningful*, which means that they should be well-defined, possible to accomplish, and significant enough to help you make notable progress. You are more likely to procrastinate when it comes to goals that are vague, compared to goals that are clearly defined. For example, “be more healthy” is a relatively vague goal: you are more likely to procrastinate when it comes to pursuing it than you are a more concrete goal like “drink only water and avoid eating fast food for the next month”.

In addition, when setting your goals, you also want to make sure that those goals are ***achievable*** and ***meaningful****:*

* ‘Achievable’ means that your goals should be realistic enough that you can actually accomplish them.
* ‘Meaningful’ means that your goals should be substantial enough that they lead you to make notable progress.

Of course, different people will choose different rates of progress, and there isn’t a single rate of progress that works for everyone. The most important thing is to find the rate of progress that works for *you*, in your particular situation. Once you set your goals, you can move on to the next step of this process, which is to identify the exact nature of your procrastination problem.

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### **Identify the problem**

If you want to successfully solve your procrastination problem, it’s important to first understand the exact nature of the problem that you’re dealing with. Specifically, there are three main factors that you should consider when assessing the nature of your procrastination:

* ***When* you procrastinate:** This involves asking yourself in what situations you procrastinate. Do you tend to procrastinate more when you’re working at home compared to when you’re working in the library? Do you struggle to finish tasks after you’ve started them or do you struggle to get started in the first place?
* ***How* you procrastinate:** This involves asking yourself what you do when you’re procrastinating. Do you browse social media, play video games, watch TV shows, hang out with friends, or find small and unimportant tasks to complete?
* ***Why* you procrastinate:** This involves asking yourself what’s causing you to procrastinate. Do you constantly find yourself being distracted? Do you feel so overwhelmed that you don’t know how to get started?

For an example of how to consider these factors, imagine a class where you need to hand in a series of assignments throughout the semester. Each time you get a new assignment, you sit in front of the computer in your room (the ‘when’), but instead of working on the assignment, you find yourself wasting time on the internet (the ‘how’), because the assignment is so boring that you can’t find the motivation to start until shortly before it’s due (the ‘why’).

### **Create a plan of action**

Once you’ve set your goals and identified the nature of your procrastination problem, you can create a plan of action that will allow you to stop procrastinating and start getting things done.

To create a plan of action, you need to figure out which anti-procrastination techniques you should use, and how to use them. These techniques fall into two main categories:

* **Behavioral techniques.** These techniques involve directly modifying your actions, by helping you instill positive behaviors and avoid negative ones. Examples of behavioral anti-procrastination techniques include breaking large tasks into smaller ones and removing distractions from your work environment.
* **Cognitive techniques.** These techniques involve directly modifying your thoughts, by helping instill positive thought patterns and avoid negative ones. Examples of cognitive anti-procrastination techniques include visualizing your future self and focusing on your goals instead of on your tasks.

Some techniques can involve a blend of behavioral and cognitive aspects and it’s not crucial to understand the distinction between these two types of techniques. Rather, the important thing is to understand the general idea behind anti-procrastination techniques. Specifically, that **you can overcome your procrastination by instilling positive behaviors and thought patterns while eliminating negative ones**.

In general, each technique is likely to help you accomplish at least one of the following things:

* **Make it easier for you to get started.** For example, leaving the document that you need to work on open on your computer before you go to sleep will make it easier for you to start working on it once you sit down at the computer the next day.
* **Make it easier for you to keep going once you’ve started.** For example, putting your phone on silent mode and out of sight reduces the likelihood that you will be distracted by notifications while you’re working, which will make it easier for you to focus on your work.
* **Make it harder for you to avoid working.** For example, turning off the WiFi on your computer and phone removes the temptation to procrastinate on social media instead of writing your paper.

You can use any combination of techniques that you want and you should pick the ones that fit you best, since different techniques will work differently for different people and will even work differently for the same person in different situations. Make sure to identify the nature of your procrastination problem before figuring out which techniques you should use in order to solve it. As you go along, try to see which techniques are working for you, and then eliminate those that don’t, while experimenting with other techniques that you haven’t tried, in order to find new beneficial approaches.

Finally, keep in mind that if this all feels like too much at first, **imperfect action is infinitely better than no action at all**. If you feel overwhelmed and don’t know where to start, just pick a single technique that you want to work on for now (if you’re not sure which one, go with the first one on the list: ‘break large tasks into smaller ones’). Later on, once you feel more comfortable with the situation, you can choose to implement additional techniques.

## **Experiment and reevaluate**

It’s important to keep in mind that **there is no ultimate cure for procrastination**: procrastination is a complex problem, and different people will benefit more from different solutions to it. There isn’t a single right way to get yourself to stop procrastinating. Rather, the best approach to dealing with this issue is to try and understand your procrastination as best you can, then try out different solutions until you find the ones that work best for you.

You should think about the techniques in this article as the various tools and weapons that you can use in your personal battle with procrastination, then figure out which ones you want to keep in your arsenal and which ones you prefer to discard.

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## **List of anti-procrastination techniques**

### **Break large tasks into smaller ones**

Breaking large tasks into smaller sub-tasks can prompt you to take action by making large tasks feel less overwhelming and by allowing you to experience a continuous stream of rewarding progress. Doing this also benefits you from an organizational perspective, by helping you identify what exactly you need to do in order to achieve your goals, enabling you to make plans that include a high level of detail.

If your goal is to write a paper for a class, you can break down the large task of writing the paper into an ordered list of subtasks that you need to perform. This list can include subtasks such as “decide on a topic”, followed by “collect a list of relevant sources”, “write the introduction”, and so on.

When using this technique, there are a few things you should keep in mind:

* **You can break tasks apart as much as you want.** A good rule of thumb is to create subtasks that take no more than a single work session to complete, meaning that you can finish them before you need to take a break.
* **If it helps, start with a small first step.** Some people find that it helps to start with a small first step. This can make it easier to get over the initial hurdle of actually getting started.
* **You don’t have to outline the entire project from the start.** If you’re dealing with a big project, you don’t need to start by outlining all its upcoming steps, and doing so can even be counterproductive. Instead, it’s often preferable to start by figuring out only the next few steps that you need to handle, and then add new ones later, once you’ve made sufficient progress.

### **Prioritize tasks**

Prioritizing your tasks can help you figure out which tasks you need to work on and when you need to work on them. This will ensure that you don’t end up procrastinating by wasting time on trivial tasks while neglecting important ones. It will also help you avoid situations where you feel overwhelmed because you’re not sure where to start or which tasks you should be working on.

Two common methods for prioritizing your tasks are the following:

* **The Ivy Lee method.** This method involves preparing a to-do list at the end of each day, and writing down a list of six tasks that you want to complete tomorrow, ranked in order of importance.
* **The Eisenhower Matrix.** This method involves categorizing each task that you have based on whether it’s important or unimportant and based on whether it’s urgent or not urgent, and then prioritizing your tasks based on these criteria.

In general, there are many methods you can use in order to prioritize your tasks. Don’t waste time over-optimizing your prioritization method or getting stuck figuring out which one to use; just pick one to start with and then try different methods until you figure out which one works best for you. If you’re unsure about this, simply go with the Ivy Lee method, which is explained above.

### **Identify your productivity cycles**

Different people have different cycles of productivity, which means that different people are productive during different times of the day. For example, some people might work better in the morning, while others might be more productive at night. Similarly, some people might be the most productive after they eat, while others might be more productive when they’re hungry.

A good way to reduce your tendency to procrastinate is to identify your *peak times*, which are the times of the day when you’re most productive, and then plan your schedule so that most of your work is scheduled for those time periods. In addition, you should also identify your *slump times*, which are the times of the day when you’re least productive, and then plan your schedule so that only your breaks or most simple tasks are scheduled for those time periods.

Finally, when accounting for your productivity cycles, keep in mind that you might be able to handle different types of tasks better during different times of the day. For example, you might be able to handle creative tasks better when it’s still early in the day, and menial tasks better when it’s relatively late.

### **Establish a routine**

Establishing a consistent daily/weekly/monthly routine can be helpful in getting you to avoid procrastinating. You can set up a routine of doing creative work early in the morning before checking emails or social media. This is a good way to ensure that you start your day being productive, completing your most important tasks while you still have a clear head.

The routine that you establish should take your daily productivity cycles into account; different routines will work for different people. Setting a routine is especially important if you tend to have an erratic sleep schedule, which could make you sleep-deprived and therefore more prone to procrastination.

### **Set deadlines for yourself**

Setting deadlines for yourself can reduce the likelihood that you will procrastinate, since deadlines serve as a *commitment device*, which helps you plan ahead and motivate yourself.

When setting deadlines for yourself, there are several things you should keep in mind:

* **Deadlines should be *concrete*.** As we saw earlier, you are more likely to follow through on commitments that are concretely defined than you are to follow through on commitments that are vague. This means, for example, that “Thursday at 4 PM” is a better deadline than “sometime tomorrow”.
* **Deadlines should be *realistic*.** You should choose deadlines that give you as much time as you need to complete a task, but no more than that. Deadlines that don’t give you enough time to get your work done can cause you to feel stressed or to give up entirely, whereas deadlines that give you more time than you need encourage you to delay unnecessarily (a phenomenon known as *Parkinson’s law*).
* **Deadlines should be *meaningful*.** Deadlines are only beneficial if you actually meet them, so your deadlines should be set up in a way that encourages you to follow through on them. An easy way to make deadlines more meaningful is to write them down, but you can use additional techniques when necessary. This could be finding someone who will hold you accountable or a way to penalize yourself if you fail to abide by your deadlines.

It’s also important to remember that **deadlines should encourage you to start working early**. As such, avoid using deadlines that encourage you to wait until the last possible minute to get started on your work.

A good way to achieve this is to create a series of minor deadlines which correspond to each of the steps that you need to complete along the path to your end goal, instead of having just a single deadline at the end. This means that you should set *proximal goals* for yourself, which are small goals that you strive to achieve while working toward your final *distal goal*. An added benefit of using these intermediate deadlines is that we tend to care more about deadlines that are close to us in time, so constantly having a nearby deadline makes us less likely to procrastinate.

### **Use time-management techniques**

You can use various time-management techniques in order to make it easier for yourself to get started on your work and to remain focused once you’ve started.

For example, you can try the *Pomodoro Technique*, which is a time-management technique where you use a timer in order to organize your workflow. The Pomodoro Technique entails working on your tasks for a set amount of time (e.g. 25 minutes), and then taking a short break (e.g. 5 minutes), before starting to work again. In addition, as part of the Pomodoro Technique, once you complete a certain number of work cycles (e.g. 4 cycles), you can take a longer break (e.g. 30 minutes), before getting back to work.

You can modify this technique and similar ones to fit your personal preferences. Instead of using a set amount of time to limit each work cycle when using the Pomodoro Technique, you can choose to use a different measure, such as the number of words that you’ve written or the number of pages that you’ve read.

### **Use timeboxing**

*Timeboxing* is a technique where you allocate specific blocks of time, called “timeboxes”, to activities that you want to do or tasks that you need to work on. For example, if you keep procrastinating on an annoying assignment that won’t take long to handle, you can schedule a 30-minute timebox for it in the evening, and finish it then.

Using timeboxing can be beneficial for a number of reasons:

* **Timeboxing can help you feel less overwhelmed or intimidated by unpleasant tasks that you need to deal with.** For example, if you need to exercise but you don’t enjoy it, knowing that you only have to do it for a set amount of time can make it feel like something that’s easier for you to handle.
* **Timeboxing can help you make sure that you dedicate enough time to important tasks that you dislike.** For example, you might decide to dedicate a certain block of time each day to studying to avoid a situation where you don’t study enough.
* **Timeboxing can help you avoid dragging out tasks that you need to finish.** For example, you might decide to dedicate 2 hours to finishing the initial design of your new blog, after which you have to move on to the next step in creating it. This will help you avoid a situation where you procrastinate for days by wasting time on trivial details.
* **Timeboxing can help you control the time you dedicate to taking breaks.** For example, you might decide to dedicate a 30-minute timebox to watching TV after lunch, after which you have to get back to working on your assignment, which will help you avoid a situation where you procrastinate for hours by continuing to binge shows.

In addition, allotting a specific timebox for a task makes it more concrete. If you just intend to do the task at some point later, a specific timebox will increase the likelihood that you’ll complete it in a timely manner.

### **Use a to-do list**

Using a to-do list is highly beneficial when it comes to helping you avoid procrastinating for several reasons:

* It helps you break down your goals into actionable tasks.
* It helps you organize your tasks, prioritize them, and schedule them in an optimal manner.
* It helps you focus only on specific tasks that you need to be thinking of at the moment.
* It helps you write down deadlines and stick with them.
* It helps you track your progress and figure out what works for you and what doesn’t.

Using a to-do list can also give you extra motivation to work on your tasks. It makes you want to be able to cross those tasks off your list and you get added satisfaction from being able to do so.

When it comes to creating your to-do list, you can use either the pen-and-paper method or one of the many apps on the market. Try out different solutions until you find the one that works best for you. As always, make sure to not get stuck over-optimizing things–simply pick one option to start with. If necessary, you can always reassess the situation and modify your solution as you go along.

### **Gamify your behavior**

*Gamification* involves incorporating elements from games, such as competition with others and the accumulation of points, into other types of activities in order to increase your motivation to work toward your goals. Gamification, when implemented correctly, can be a powerful tool when it comes to getting yourself to stop procrastinating.

For example, to increase your motivation to complete tasks, you could reward yourself a number of points for each task that you complete, and deduct a number of points for each task you procrastinate on. Furthermore, you can decide that once you get a certain number of points, you’ll reward yourself in some way which provides you with increased motivation.

There is no single method of gamification that works perfectly for everyone. If you decide to use gamification, you should try out different ways of implementing it, until you find the one that helps you deal with your type of procrastination as effectively as possible.

### **Reward yourself for your accomplishments**

People often procrastinate because important tasks that are rewarding for them in the long-term are not as appealing than less beneficial behaviors that feel more rewarding in the short-term. As such, you can reduce the likelihood that you will procrastinate by associating rewards that are pleasant in the short-term with actions that are good for you in the long-term.

For example, you can decide to take a short break and watch some TV for every chapter that you read in preparation for a test, or you could eat a small piece of chocolate as a reward for every task that you complete while working on a project. Similarly, you can also make your accomplishments more rewarding by doing simple things such as writing down every task that you complete throughout the day, and then going over them at night to see how much you managed to get done.

*You can reward yourself either for getting started on a task, for completing it, or for working on it in general.* Rewards should be given for behaviors that are meaningful enough that they allow you to make progress, but that are also accessible enough that they motivate you in the short-term.

### **Create streaks**

One way to motivate yourself to get things done is to create *streaks* (or *chains*) of completed tasks that you don’t want to break. For example, you might decide that each day that you go without wasting time on social media or each day that you successfully write another page in your final paper counts as another day you get to add to your streak. How you keep track of your streaks is up to you, but the more meaningful you make the streak, the more you will want to maintain it, and the more you will be motivated to avoid procrastinating.

### **Plan ahead for future contingencies**

One of the main reasons why people fail to break the procrastination cycle is that despite truly wanting to stop procrastinating, they fail to plan ahead for circumstances that could cause them to procrastinate. This issue can be significantly mitigated by creating a strong *implementation intention*. You can do this by identifying future situations where you might struggle to self-regulate your behavior successfully, and come up with appropriate goal-directed behaviors that you should engage in if you ever find yourself in those situations.

For example, if you notice that you frequently procrastinate because people invite you to hang out and you find it difficult to say “no” *even when you know you should be working*, you can come up with a pre-planned response that will make it easier for you to politely refuse people’s offers. This will make it easier for you to stick to your goals when you’re faced with the temptation to do otherwise.

### **Increase your energy levels**

Increasing your energy levels is one of the best ways to get out of slumps and get yourself to stop procrastinating, since being tired can make you more likely to procrastinate.

Specifically, the following are some of the main things that you can do in order to increase your energy levels:

* **Get enough sleep.** In general, you’re more likely to procrastinate if you’re not getting enough sleep. Simply making sure that you sleep enough will help you be more productive and will lead to various other improvements to your physical health, mental health, and general wellbeing.
* **Drink some water.** Dehydration is a big problem when it comes to your ability to concentrate on your work and you can easily solve it by just drinking a glass of water from time to time. Other drinks are acceptable in moderation, but try to avoid consuming too much caffeine or sugar, which can cause your energy levels to crash after a while.
* **Eat something (moderately) healthy.** If you’re hungry, eat something that will give you some energy. Avoid junk food or snacks that will spike your energy for a short while and then cause you to feel tired.
* **Take a break and go outside.** If you’re stuck inside all day and feel that the walls are closing in on you, take a short break and go outside to breathe some fresh air and clear your head.
* **Get some exercise.** If you haven’t done anything physical in a while, try to get your body moving a bit. You don’t have to do anything major. Even a short walk, a few pushups, or a bit of stretching can help you feel better.
* **Listen to music.** Listening to certain types of music that you like can sometimes give you an energizing motivational boost while you work.

### **Improve your work environment**

A bad work environment can cause you to procrastinate more, while a good work environment can help you be more productive. As such, you should try to improve your work environment as much as possible by making it a place where you find it easy to focus on your work. If your desk is so cluttered that it’s hard for you to focus on reading, this could make you more susceptible to distractions and therefore also to procrastination. This is especially important for chronic procrastinators, since they frequently tend to collect an excessive amount of clutter which they struggle to remove, despite feeling that it lowers their quality of life. If this is an issue for you, cleaning up your working environment will likely help you feel better, which will help you concentrate on your work.

### **Change your work location**

If you find that you’re more likely to procrastinate on your work when you try to get it done in a certain location, then go somewhere else when you want to work. If you can’t bring yourself to stop procrastinating when you’re trying to work on the computer in your room, then go to the library or to a coffee shop and work there instead. This is especially important when it comes to separating the areas where you work from the areas where you conduct other functions of your life, such as playing, resting, or eating. Having a location dedicated exclusively to work can help make it easier for you to switch into “work mode” when you need to get things done.

### **Eliminate distractions**

Removing distractions from your environment makes it more likely that you will focus on your work and avoid procrastinating. If your phone emits a loud sound each time you get a notification, you’re going to constantly be distracted while you work, which will make it hard for you to focus. In such situations, you will want to put your phone on silent mode while you work or use a dedicated app to block notifications. This will help you concentrate on your work.

When doing this, you should keep in mind the harmful influence that even seemingly minor distractions can have on you. For example, even if you’re not actively using your phone, simply having it out on your desk serves as a significant distraction. Though putting your phone inside your bag can reduce the degree to which it is a distraction, having the phone there still occupies more of your mental resources than having it in a different room, entirely out of reach.

### **Add a delay before indulging your impulses**

One way to help yourself resist the desire to engage in impulsive behaviors like procrastination is to add a brief delay before you indulge yourself.

If you want to check your phone for notifications or check a website for new posts, you should make yourself count to 10 first. Then, if the urge to engage in that procrastinatory behavior is still there, you can follow through on it. However, if the urge to do it disappears, which it often will while you count, you can choose to get back to work instead. If necessary, you can decide to count a bit higher (e.g. up to 20 or 30), as long as you make sure to actually count at a reasonable pace each time you do this. More importantly, remember that you’re not allowed to do anything else while you count, unless it’s related directly to your work.

If you use this count every time you’re about to procrastinate, you will find that the urge to do so is often temporary, and passes once you wait a short while.

### **Make it harder for yourself to procrastinate**

The more difficult you make it for yourself to engage in procrastinatory behaviors, the better you will be able to prevent yourself from procrastinating. For example, if you need to write a paper on your laptop and you tend to procrastinate by browsing social media, blocking the sites that you usually look at while procrastinating will make it more difficult for you to procrastinate. This will significantly increase the likelihood that you will get to work, simply because there’s nothing else for you to do.

### **Make unpleasant tasks more enjoyable**

In general, the more unpleasant a certain task is, the more likely you are to procrastinate on it. Therefore, by making unpleasant tasks more appealing, you reduce the likelihood that you will procrastinate on them. There are many ways you can make tasks more appealing. For example, if you need to clean the house, you can put on music that you like and try to time yourself to see how much you can get done in a 10-minute sprint of work.

### **Use nudges**

Nudges are small modifications that you can make to your environment in order to get yourself to get your work done in a timely manner. If your goal is to get good grades because you want to get into a specific university, consider putting a small sticker with the logo of your dream school on your laptop, which will give you a small motivational boost when you need to start working. Similarly, if your issue is that you often end up gaming for longer than intended, you could set up an alarm on your phone that goes off after a certain amount of time. Make sure you put the phone close enough that you can hear it but far enough that you have to get up and leave your gaming platform in order to stop the alarm.

### **Minimize the number of decisions you have to make**

The more decisions you have to make during a certain time period, the more fatigued you become from a mental perspective, and the more likely you are to procrastinate when it comes to making new decisions. As such, by minimizing the number of decisions you have to make within a certain timeframe, you can improve your ability to make decisions in a timely manner.

If you need to write a paper, you can create a timeline of which parts of the paper you need to work on in advance, so that you don’t have to make the decision of what to work on each day. Similarly, you can pick the clothes that you will wear the next day right before you go to sleep, which will save you from having to make that decision right as you’re starting your day. Note that the more options you have to choose from when deciding what to do, the more difficult it will be for you to make a decision, and the more likely you will be to procrastinate. By minimizing the number of options that you can choose from, you can reduce the likelihood that you will procrastinate.

### **Set time constraints for decision-making**

If you tend to procrastinate because you struggle to make decisions in a timely manner, you can limit the time that you have available to make decisions by setting artificial time constraints for yourself. If you need to decide which design scheme to use in a presentation, you can set a timer with 1 minute on it, and decide that once the timer runs out, you *have* to go with one of the available options, even if you’re not perfectly sure that it’s the right one.

This technique is especially useful in situations where there is no new information for you to take into consideration, or in situations where the decision that you need to make isn’t too important in the first place. For example, when none of the available options is significantly better than the others, meaning that it doesn’t really matter which one you choose.

### **Use countdowns**

The *countdown* is a technique that involves choosing a number (e.g., 5), counting down from that number while telling yourself that once you reach zero you’ll get started on your work, and then prompting yourself to get started once you actually reach zero. To make countdowns more effective, you can condition yourself to abide by them, by using them before doing things that you have no problem with (e.g., easy everyday tasks), which can help you get used to following through on countdowns when dealing with more difficult tasks.

In addition, a useful version of this technique is to set a countdown timer on your computer or phone, instead of counting in your head. In this case, if you fail to start working once the timer runs out, then you can keep the timer’s alarm on until you manage to get started, which will increase your motivation to take action.

### **Start with your best or worst tasks**

Some people find it beneficial to start their day by dealing with the task that they dread the most, so they can immediately get it out of the way, and go through the rest of the day knowing that they already took care of it. This approach is referred to as *eating the frog* (or *eating the elephant beetle*), where the ‘frog’ signifies the unpleasant task that you have to take care of. Alternatively, some people find it more beneficial to start with their easiest tasks first, in order to help themselves get started and enter the right mindset that they need for work.

Either option may prove more effective for different people and in different situations, so you should try them both in order to figure out which one works for you. When doing this, keep in mind that the easiest/hardest task can apply to various things, such as the easiest task out of a specific project, or the easiest task that you have to deal with on a certain day.

### **Start with a tiny step**

Deciding to commit to only a tiny step can sometimes help you get started on tasks that you’re procrastinating on, especially when you’re procrastinating because the task feels overwhelming or scary in some way. For example, you can sit down intending to only write a single sentence on your essay or you can go to the gym intending to work out for just a few minutes.

Often, you’ll find that getting started was the hardest part, and that once you start engaging with the task it becomes fairly easy to keep going. In addition, even if you decide to stop after taking that tiny step, which is perfectly acceptable to do, you’ll still have made more progress than you would have otherwise, especially when it comes to dealing with the mental blocks that cause you to procrastinate in the first place.

This concept is sometimes referred to as the *2-minute rule* or the *5-minute rule*, to signify that you should set out with the intention of working on your task for just a few minutes. However, you can commit to other blocks of time too (e.g. 10 minutes), and, as noted above, you can choose to commit to other units of work (e.g. writing a sentence on your paper). If you do decide to implement this concept using a time limit, consider setting up a timer, which could help you convince yourself that you’re only committing to a small amount of time.

### **Immediately complete small tasks**

One way to avoid procrastinating on small tasks is to simply get them done as soon as you find out that you need to do them, whenever it’s possible for you to do so. This has the added benefit of preventing these small tasks from piling up until they become overwhelming and is often much more efficient than wasting time scheduling these tasks for later.

This concept is sometimes referred to as the *2-minute rule*, to signify how short a task should be for you to choose to take care of it immediately. However, it’s up to you to decide how small a task needs to be for you to implement this rule. The important thing isn’t necessarily how long it takes, but rather whether you will benefit from taking care of it as soon as you figure out that you need to do it.

Note that this concept represents one of two possible versions of the *2-minute rule*; the other one, which is covered in the previous entry (‘start with a tiny step’), suggests that you should bring yourself to get started on tasks by committing to only spending a small amount of time on them.

### **Eliminate bottlenecks**

A *bottleneck* is a task that’s causing you to delay when it comes to a number of other tasks, because you can’t move forward with them until you deal with the bottleneck first.

A bottleneck can be a bottleneck for a variety of reasons. There are practical reasons, like that you just can’t analyze data until you’ve collected it, as well as mental reasons, like wanting to finish a project that you’re working on before you move on to the next one.

If you notice that one of your tasks is a bottleneck and that you’re procrastinating on it, it can be highly beneficial to find a way to deal with it somehow. There are several ways you can go about doing this:

* **Just get it done.** This is obviously the best course of action and might be doable if you use some of the other strategies which are available in this guide. However, if you find that you’re still stuck on the bottleneck after a while, it’s better to use a different approach instead.
* **Postpone it.** Sometimes, it can be better to postpone the bottleneck in order to allow yourself to focus on other things in the meantime, and then return to it once you’ve had some time to clear your mind.
* **Modify it.** Sometimes, you might be able to change the bottleneck in a way that will either allow you to get it done or ensure that it’s no longer a bottleneck.
* **Delegate it.** Sometimes, you might be able to delegate a bottleneck task to someone else who will be able to handle it for you.
* **Eliminate it entirely.** Sometimes, you can decide that a certain task just isn’t that important to do after all, and that you can simply delete it from your to-do list and ignore it entirely, especially if it’s preventing you from making progress on more important things.

Different methods for dealing with bottlenecks will work better in different scenarios, based on factors such as your personal abilities and the nature of the task at hand. The most important thing is to realize that the task that you’re dealing with is a bottleneck, and to then find the approach for dealing with it that will work best for you.

### **Switch between tasks**

If you find yourself procrastinating on something because you feel stuck, consider switching to a different task for a while before returning to the original tasks that you were procrastinating on. Doing this is beneficial even if it would ideally be preferable for you to work on the original task, since it’s better to get something less important done than to do nothing at all. Shifting between tasks at your discretion could help you become “unstuck” when it’s time to return to the original task.

### **Procrastinate in a productive way**

You can sometimes get work done while you’re procrastinating on something important, by accepting the urge to procrastinate and diverting your efforts toward other tasks that you find less aversive. For example, if you find yourself procrastinating on writing an essay, then instead of wasting time passively watching TV, you can work on some other task that you don’t want to complete, like washing the dishes.

This technique, which is called *productive procrastination* (or *structured procrastination*), can be useful to implement, because even though it means that you’re not getting your highest-priority task done, doing something that isn’t at the top of your to-do list is still better than doing nothing at all.

However, when implementing this technique, it’s important to make sure that it doesn’t become a way to enable long-term procrastination in a way that significantly hinders your progress. In addition, you should also make sure that the tasks you’re working on while procrastinating do have some value, and aren’t just a meaningless way to waste time and achieve a false sense of progress.

Finally, you should also try to identify situations where it would be more beneficial to simply take a break instead of trying to implement this technique, which could help you avoid wasting time and energy by trying to be productive during times where the circumstances are against you.

### **Take a break**

Sometimes, taking a short break can help you clear your head, recharge mentally, and find the motivation that you need in order to get started on your work. For example, if you’ve just finished writing a paper, and are now procrastinating on your computer instead of getting started on your next assignment, getting up from the computer and taking a short break could help you “reboot” your mind and switch it back to work mode.

To make the most of your breaks, try to actively use them with the goal of helping yourself recharge, and *treat them as you would any other task*. For example, instead of taking a break which consists of browsing social media until you feel ready to work again, it would be preferable to take five minutes to get up from the computer and stretch your legs before coming back to work.

This approach can often work better if you leave the environment that you were working in, and take a break somewhere else instead. This helps your brain to shift from ‘work mode’ to ‘break mode’, which could make the break feel more refreshing, and which could help you get right back to work once you’re done.

### **Improve your emotion-regulation skills**

Because we often procrastinate as a result of improper emotion-regulation, improving your ability to control your emotions can help you reduce your tendency to procrastinate in various situations. There are two main ways you can improve your emotion-regulation skills:

* **Use *adaptive* emotion-regulation strategies.** Adaptive strategies are strategies that allow you to cope with difficult situations in a positive way. For example, if you’re working on a task but keep being distracted by thoughts about other tasks that you’ll have to take care of later, an adaptive coping strategy that you can use is to dedicate yourself fully to the task at hand and focus all your attention on the present moment as you experience it.
* **Avoid *maladaptive* emotion-regulation strategies.** Maladaptive strategies are strategies that cause you to deal with difficult situations in a negative way. For example, if you’re worried that there is a problem with the way you’re doing a certain task, a maladaptive coping strategy that you might end up using is to avoid acknowledging any issues that you encounter in your work.

Your goal in using adaptive strategies and avoiding maladaptive ones is to improve your ability to deal with the *presence* of *negative* emotions, such as anger or frustration, and to also deal with the *absence* of *positive* emotions, which you might experience, for example, if the task that you need to complete is unrewarding in the short-term.

One basic emotion-regulation strategy that you can use is to actively acknowledge the presence of negative emotions or the lack of positive ones, and to then remind yourself of your mental toughness, and of your commitment to finishing the task at hand.

### **Figure out what you’re afraid of**

People often procrastinate because they’re afraid of something, whether that thing is doing badly on a task or getting negative feedback from others. Identifying the reason why you’re worried about a task can help you cope with your fear, which in turn can help you get started on your work. For example, if you realize that you’re procrastinating on starting a new hobby because you’re worried that you’ll embarrass yourself, you can talk to people in the community in order to address this fear, which will help you bring yourself to get started.

### **Give yourself permission to make mistakes**

*Perfectionism*, which is the tendency to strive toward flawlessness in one’s work, can cause people to procrastinate in several ways:

* Perfectionism can cause you to delay getting started, because you’re worried that you won’t be able to produce work that’s perfect.
* Perfectionism can cause you to continue revising your work endlessly, because you keep finding minor flaws in your work.
* Perfectionism can cause you to avoid releasing your work or making it public, because you’re afraid that it’s not absolutely perfect.

Realizing that you’re procrastinating because of your perfectionism is the first step to dealing with this issue. Once you’re aware that this is a problem, you must internalize the fact that it’s okay for your work to not be absolutely flawless, and that you shouldn’t let your fear of making a mistake cause you to procrastinate.

For example, if your problem is that you can’t even get started, then you need to accept the fact that your work is always going to have some flaws at first. Try to get something done, even if it’s of low quality during this initial stage, and remember that you can always improve it later. Similarly, if your problem is that you continue to revise your work endlessly or that you avoid submitting your work, you can ask for feedback from knowledgeable people that you trust, who can give you an honest assessment of the quality of your work, and tell you whether it’s ready to be submitted, and if not then what improvements you need to make. You can also ask yourself what the consequences of submitting work that isn’t absolutely perfect are, and then follow this up by asking yourself how bad these consequences are, and how they weigh compared to the benefits of getting your work turned in.

### **Forgive yourself for past procrastination**

Forgiving yourself for past instances of procrastination can help you procrastinate less in the future, and reduce some of the negative emotions associated with procrastination. For example, research shows that students who forgave themselves for procrastinating on past exams procrastinate less when it came time to study for later exams.

However, note that this doesn’t mean that you should repeatedly forgive yourself for *ongoing* procrastination while you’re engaging in it, since this could cause you to lose the drive that you need in order to want to change. Rather, you should make sure to forgive yourself when it comes to old mistakes, in cases where being angry at yourself for those mistakes is holding you back.

### **Develop self-compassion**

*Self-compassion* involves extending sympathy to yourself, particularly when you struggle or suffer. It is comprised of three key components:

* ***Self-kindness* (as opposed to *self-judgment*).** This involves being warm, gentle, and understanding toward yourself during tough times, and accepting that things don’t always work out, rather than being frustrated, engaging in harsh self-criticism, or trying to ignore or suppress your pain.
* ***Common humanity* (as opposed to *isolation*).** This involves recognizing that suffering and imperfection are part of the shared human experience, which almost everyone experiences, rather than something that happens to you alone and isolates you from others.
* ***Mindfulness* (as opposed to *over-identification*).** This involves paying attention to yourself and your environment as they are in the present moment, and accepting your thoughts and emotions in a non-reactive and non-judgmental manner as you’re experiencing them, rather than letting them overwhelm you.

There are various techniques that you can use in order to increase your self-compassion.

One technique is to remind yourself that everyone makes mistakes sometimes, which can help you accept the fact that you did so yourself. To help yourself internalize this concept, you can, for example, think about situations in which other people that you think highly of have made similar mistakes in the past, or about how you would react if a friend of yours made the same mistake.

It’s also important to make sure that your self-compassion doesn’t turn into a way to enable yourself to continue procrastinating. So, when practicing self-compassion, you should always ask yourself whether doing so is helping you cope with your procrastination, or whether it’s encouraging you to procrastinate more in the long run.

### **Focus on the goal instead of on the task**

One way to increase your motivation to work on tasks that you view as boring or unpleasant is to focus on your end goals instead of on the tasks themselves. If you’re procrastinating on an assignment because it’s boring, try to not think about the task itself when you’re trying to get yourself to do the work, but rather think about your underlying reason for wanting to complete it, whether it’s to get a good grade, to get a promotion, or even just to be able to relax without feeling guilty.

Note that this approach, which involves adopting an *outcome focus*, is generally most effective when you are averse to the task at hand. However, there are situations where it can be more beneficial to adopt a *process focus*, which entails focusing on the task at hand instead of on the goal, such as in cases where you have a high fear of failure, meaning that focusing on the task itself could potentially distract you from that issue.

### **Adopt an external perspective**

If you’re struggling with a procrastination problem and you’re not sure how to deal with it, it can sometimes be beneficial to try to view your situation from an external perspective, since this can help you analyze the situation better.

If you keep procrastinating because you’re not sure how to get yourself to start working on an idea that you have, you could use self-distancing language when thinking about the situation, by asking yourself “what should *you* do” instead of “what should *I* do”. Alternatively, another thing that you could do is imagine what you would say to a friend if they came to you asking for advice on a similar situation.

### **Find someone who can hold you accountable**

Having a person who will hold you accountable for your actions can help you stop procrastinating in some situations. You could tell a close friend that you’re trying to get yourself to finally start working on a project that you’ve been meaning to work on and that you’ll give them $5 if you haven’t done so by the start of next week.

The person who holds you accountable can be anyone that you trust, whether it’s a teacher, a colleague, a parent, or a friend. The better they can hold you accountable, the more their assistance will motivate you to do your work in a timely manner. There doesn’t necessarily have to be any tangible reward or penalty involved in the way that the other person holds you accountable; if you care enough about their opinion of you, sometimes even wanting them to be proud of your actions or wanting to avoid disappointing them can be all the motivation you need.

### **Find a role model**

A *role model* is someone who you admire, based on factors such as their values, actions, or accomplishments, and who you aspire to be like. Finding a role model for yourself and then trying to emulate them can potentially help you regulate your behavior better in a number of ways, such as by increasing your internal drive to persevere in the face of obstacles.

For example, if you have a specific role model in mind and you find yourself in a situation where you know that you should work but you feel a desire to procrastinate, ask yourself what your role model would do if they were in the same situation, or how you would feel if they could see you now.

### **Seek favorable peer influence**

The people that you spend time with can have a significant impact on your ability to avoid procrastinating. To account for this, there are two main things you should do:

* **Seek positive peer influence.** This means that you should try to spend time with people who have a good influence on you. This includes, for example, people who work hard, pursue their goals, and hold themselves accountable for their actions, and who encourage you to do the same.
* **Avoid negative peer influence.** This means that you should try to minimize the amount of time you spend around people who have a bad influence on you. This includes, for example, people who waste their time, neglect their goals, and never accept responsibility for their actions, and who encourage you to do the same.

### **Build a social support network**

A *social support network* is a group of people that you can rely on to give you emotional, informational, and practical help. For example, a close friend or a study partner are two types of people that you might include in your social support network.

Social support can be beneficial when it comes to reducing procrastination in some cases. For example, if you’re procrastinating because you’re afraid of failing at something, talking to someone in your social support network could help you overcome your fear. The nature or size of your support network isn’t crucial, as long as you have the support that you need.

Furthermore, in some cases, you can also benefit from having a significant *personal network*, which includes people who share your situation in some way, but who you don’t necessarily expect to support you. For example, your peers in the classroom or your colleagues at work could both be considered part of your personal network. This type of network can be beneficial even if the people in it don’t help you directly, because simply knowing that they’re there and that they share your situation can help you feel motivated, and can help you set realistic expectations for yourself.