



The Writing Center
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb>

Procrastination

The art of writing is the art of applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair.
—Mary Heaton Vorse

What this handout is about

This handout will help you understand why you procrastinate and offer strategies and to combat this common writer's ailment.

Introduction

Everyone procrastinates. We put things off because we don't want to do them, or because we have too many other things on our plates. Putting things off—big or small—is part of being human. If you are reading this handout, however, it is likely that your procrastination is troubling you. You suspect that you could be a much better writer if only you didn't put off writing projects until the last minute. You find that just when you have really gotten going on a paper, it's time to turn it in; so, you never really have time to revise or proofread carefully. You love the rush of adrenalin you get when you finish a paper ten minutes before it's due, but you (and your body) are getting tired of pulling all-nighters. You feel okay about procrastinating while in college, but you worry that this habit will follow you into your working life.

You can tell whether or not you need to do something about your procrastination by examining its consequences. Procrastination can have external consequences (you get a zero on the paper because you never turned it in) or internal consequences (you feel anxious much of the time, even when you are doing something that you enjoy). If you put off washing the dishes, but the dishes don't bother you, who cares? When your procrastination leaves you feeling discouraged and overburdened, however, it is time to take action.

Is there hope?

If you think you are a hopeless procrastinator, take heart! No one is beyond help. The fact that you procrastinate does not mean that you are inherently lazy or inefficient. Your procrastination is not an untamable beast. It is a habit that has some specific origin, and it is a habit that you can overcome. This handout will help you begin to understand why you procrastinate and give you some strategies for turning things around. For most procrastinators, however, there are no quick fixes. You aren't going to wake up tomorrow and never procrastinate again. But you might wake up tomorrow and do one or two simple things that will help you finish that draft a little earlier or with less stress.

You may not be surprised to learn that procrastinators tend to be self-critical. So, as you consider your procrastination and struggle to develop different work habits, try to be gentle with yourself. Punishing yourself every time you realize you have put something off won't help you change. Rewarding yourself when you make progress will.

If you don't care why you procrastinate—you just want to know what to do about it—then you might as well skip the next section of this handout and go right to the section labeled "What to do about it." If you skip to the strategies, however, you may only end up more frustrated. Taking the time to learn about why you procrastinate may help you avoid the cycle whereby you swear up and down that you will never procrastinate again, only to find that the next time you have a paper due, you are up until 3 a.m. trying to complete the first (and only) draft—without knowing why or how you got there.

Why we do it

In order to stop putting off your writing assignments, it is important to understand why you tend to do so in the first place. Some of the reasons that people procrastinate include the following:

Because we are afraid.

- **Fear of failure:** If you are scared that a particular piece of writing isn't going to turn out well, then you may avoid working on it in order to avoid feeling the fear.
- **Fear of success:** Some procrastinators (the author of this handout included) fear that if they start working at their full capacity, they will turn into workaholics. Since we procrastinate compulsively, we assume that we will also write compulsively; we envision ourselves locked in a library carrel, hunched over the computer, barely eating and sleeping and never seeing friends or going out. The procrastinator who fears success may also assume that if they work too hard, they will become mean and cold to the people around them, thus losing their capacity to be friendly and to have fun. Finally, this type of procrastinator may think that if they stop procrastinating, then they will start writing better, which will increase other people's expectations, thus ultimately increasing the amount of pressure they experience.
- **Fear of losing autonomy:** Some people delay writing projects as a way of maintaining their independence. When they receive a writing assignment, they procrastinate as a way of saying, "You can't make me do this. I am my own person." Procrastinating helps them feel more in control of situations (such as college) in which they believe that other people have authority.
- **Fear of being alone:** Other writers procrastinate because they want to feel constantly connected to other people. For instance, you may procrastinate until you are in such a bind that someone has to come and rescue you. Procrastination therefore ensures that other people will be involved in your life. You may also put off writing because you don't want to be alone, and writing is oftentimes a solitary activity. In its worst form, procrastination itself can become a companion, constantly reminding you of all that you have to do.
- **Fear of attachment:** Rather than fearing separation, some people procrastinate in order to create a barrier between themselves and others. They may delay in order to create chaos in their lives, believing that the chaos will keep other people away.

Whether these fears appear in our conscious or subconscious minds, they paralyze us and keep us from taking action, until discomfort and anxiety overwhelms us and forces us to either a) get the piece of writing done or b) give up. (The preceding is a summary of Chapters 2-4 of Jane B. Burka and Lenora M. Yuen's *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1983.)

Because we expect ourselves to be perfect.

Procrastination and perfectionism often go hand in hand. Perfectionists tend to procrastinate because they expect so much of themselves, and they are scared about whether or not they can meet those high standards. Perfectionists sometimes think that it is better to give a half-hearted effort and maintain the belief that they could have written a great paper, than to give a full effort and risk writing a mediocre paper. Procrastinating guarantees failure, but it helps perfectionists maintain their belief that they could have excelled if they had tried harder. Another pitfall for perfectionists is that they tend to ignore progress toward a goal. As long as the writing project is incomplete, they feel as though they aren't getting anywhere, rather than recognizing that each paragraph moves them closer to a finished product.

Because we don't like our writing.

You may procrastinate on writing because you don't like to re-read what you have written; you hate writing a first draft and then being forced to evaluate it, in all its imperfection. By procrastinating, you ensure that you don't have time to read over your work, thus avoiding that uncomfortable moment.

Because we're too busy.

Practical concerns: jobs, other classes, etc.

Because it works.

Unfortunately, procrastination helps reinforce itself. When we avoid doing something we dread (like writing) by doing something we enjoy (such as watching TV, hanging out with friends, etc.), we escape the dreaded task. Given such a choice, it's no wonder that many of us choose to procrastinate. When we write a paper at the last minute and still manage to get a good grade, we feel all the more compelled to procrastinate next time around.

What to do about it

Now that you know a little bit about why you may have procrastinated in the past, let's explore some of the strategies you might use to combat your procrastination tendencies, now and in the future. Experiment with whichever of these strategies appeals to you; if you try something and it doesn't work, try something else! Be patient; improvement will come with practice.

Take an inventory.

Figuring out exactly when and how you procrastinate can help you stop the behavior. It can be difficult to tell when you are procrastinating. Think about the clues that tell you that's what you're doing: for example, a nagging voice in your head, a visual image of what you are avoiding or the consequences of not doing it, physical ailments (stomach tightness, headaches, muscle tension), inability to concentrate, inability to enjoy what you are doing.

How do you procrastinate?

- Try to ignore the task, hoping against hope that it will go away?
- Over- or under-estimate the degree of difficulty that the task involves?
- Minimize the impact that your performance now may have on your future?
- Substitute something important for something really important? (For example, cleaning instead of writing your paper.)
- Let a short break become a long one, or an evening in which you do no work at all? (For example, claiming that you are going to watch TV for ½ hour, then watching it all night.)
- Focus on one part of the task, at the expense of the rest? (For example, keep working on the introduction, while putting off writing the body and conclusion).
- Spend too much time researching or choosing a topic

Once you better understand how you procrastinate, you will be better able to catch yourself doing it. Too often, we don't even realize that we are procrastinating—until it's too late.

Create a productive environment.

If you have made the decision to stop delaying on a particular writing project, it is critical that you find a place to work where you have at least half a chance of actually getting some writing done. Your dorm room may not be the place where you are most productive. Ditto the computer lab. If you have a laptop computer, try going someplace where you can't connect to the Internet (e-mail and the Web are the bane of the procrastinator's existence—as you probably already know). If you are a procrastinator, then chances are you are already pretty exasperated; don't risk frustrating yourself even more by trying to write in an environment that doesn't meet your needs.

[CAUTION: The most skilled procrastinators will be tempted to take this suggestion too far, spending an inordinate amount of time "creating a productive environment" (cleaning, filing, etc.) and not nearly enough time actually writing. Don't fall into that trap! While cleaning and filing are indeed worthy and necessary activities, if you only do this when you have an approaching writing deadline, then you are procrastinating.]

While you are thinking about where to write, consider also when you will write. When are you most alert? Is it at 8 a.m., mid-morning, mid-afternoon, early evening, or late at night? Try to schedule writing time when you know you will be at your best. Don't

worry about when you "should" be able to write; just focus on when you are able to write.

Challenge your myths.

In order to break the procrastination habit, we need to get past the idea that in order to write, we must have all the information pertaining to the topic, and we must have optimal writing conditions. In reality, writers never have all the information, and conditions are never optimal.

Think of a writing project that you are currently putting off. On one side of a piece of paper, write down all the reasons for your delay. On the other side, argue (as convincingly as possible!) against the delay.

Myth #1: "I can't function in a messy environment. I can't possibly write this paper until I have cleaned my apartment."

Challenge: There are no conditions that are necessary in order for you to write, save two: 1) You must have a writing implement (e.g., a keyboard or a pen) and 2) you must have someplace for writing to go, such as into a computer or onto a piece of paper. If, when faced with a writing project, you start piling up prerequisites for all the things you must do before you can possibly start writing, consider whether you might in fact be making excuses—in other words, procrastinating.

Myth #2: "I know it's time for me to start writing, but I just haven't done enough research yet. I'll spend one more night at the library, and then I'll start writing my paper."

Challenge: Truth be told, you will never collect all the information you possibly could for your paper. Better to write a tightly-crafted argument with the information you have NOW, AT THIS VERY MOMENT, than to keep doing research and risk throwing your paper together at the last minute.

Myth #3: "I do my best work under pressure."

Challenge: There are lots of other ways to create pressure for yourself, besides waiting until the night before the paper is due to start writing it. You can set a time limit for yourself—for example, "I will write this paragraph in ½ hour"—or you can pretend that the paper is a timed essay exam. If you do this a week or two before the paper is due, you'll have a draft in plenty of time to revise and edit it.

Myth #4: "In order to work on my paper, I must have six uninterrupted hours."

Challenge: You can and should work on a paper in one hour blocks (or shorter). This will help you break the writing task down into smaller pieces, thereby making it seem more manageable. If you know that you can work on one part of the paper for one hour, then it won't seem so daunting, and you will be less likely to procrastinate.

Some writers find, however, that they do need longer blocks of time in order to really produce anything. Therefore, like all of the strategies outlined here, if this one doesn't work for you, throw it out and try something else. You might still find, however, that you are more productive when you plan to write "all morning" rather than "all day."

Myth #5: "What I write has to be perfect, " AND/OR "I can't write anything until I have a perfect thesis statement/intro."

Challenge: A first draft (or a second, or a third, or even—egad!—the final product) does not have to be perfect. When we write an early draft, we need to turn off our internal critic and just get some words down on the page. The great thing about starting early on a writing project is that it leaves us plenty of time for revision, editing, and proofreading; so, we can set ourselves free to just let our writing flow, without worrying about sentence-level concerns such as grammar, punctuation, and style. You'll find some other thoughts on editing in our handouts on proofreading (proofread.html) and revision (revision.html) .

Break it down.

The day you get the paper assignment (ideally), or shortly thereafter, break the writing assignment up into the smallest possible

chunks. By doing this, the paper never has a chance to take on gargantuan proportions in your mind. You can say to yourself, "Right now, I'm going to write the introduction. That's all, just the introduction!" And you may be more likely to sit down and do that, than you will to sit down and "write the paper."

Get a new attitude.

We shoot ourselves in the foot, to begin with, by telling ourselves how horrible a particular writing assignment is. Changing our attitude toward the task, when possible, may go a long way toward keeping us from procrastinating. Tell yourself that the task isn't so bad or difficult, that you either know how to do it, or that you can learn how while you're doing it. You may find, too, that if you start early on a particular assignment, your attitude never has a chance to get very negative in the first place! Simply starting to write can often help us feel more positive about writing.

Ask for help.

- Get an anti-procrastination coach. If you are really determined not to procrastinate, then get help from the supportive people in your life. Tell someone about your writing goal and timeline, and ask them to help you determine whether or not your plan is realistic. Once or twice a week, email with a friend, relative, or mentor, in order to report (admit?) on your progress, and declare your promise for the next week (or few days). If, despite your very good intentions, you start procrastinating again, do not think, "All is lost!" Instead, talk to someone about it. They may be able to help you put your slip into perspective and get back on track.
- Get a buddy. See if you can find a friend to work alongside you. They don't have to be writing a paper; in fact, they can be playing Solitaire, for all you care. What matters is that you arrange to meet them at the library (or wherever you have decided to write) at a particular time and stay there for a specific period of time, thus creating accountability.
- Get help with your writing. If you are procrastinating because you think you are a weak writer, then ask someone (a Writing Center tutor, a current or former professor or teaching assistant, a friend) to help you improve.
- Form a writing group. A writing group is a great way for undergraduate and more advanced writers alike to create accountability, get feedback, and simply get reminded that you are not alone in the struggle to produce and to improve your writing. See our writing group (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/WritingGroups/writegroup.html>) packet at for more information on how to form and sustain a writing group. Dissertation writers may benefit not only from joining a writing group but also from reading our handout on the dissertation ([dissertation.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/dissertation.html)) . This handout was written by a former Writing Center staff member who eventually completed her dissertation.

Get unblocked.

Sometimes, we procrastinate because we feel stuck on a particular essay or section of an essay. If this happens, you have several options:

- Turn off the screen. Type with a dark screen, so you can't see what you've written, decide you don't like it, and delete it immediately. Sometimes procrastination stems from insecurity about what to say, or whether we have anything to say. The important thing, in that case, is to get started and KEEP GOING. Turning off the screen may help lessen your fear and turn off your internal critic. When you turn it back on (or print out what you've written), you may find that you do have something to say, after all.
- Write about writing. Take 15 minutes and write a letter to yourself about why you don't want to write this. This lets you vent your frustrations and anxieties. Then, Take 15 minutes and write about what you could do to get unstuck. You can also try writing about what you're going to write, making an initial assessment of the assignment. You won't have the pressure of writing an actually draft, but you will be able to get something down on paper.
- Write the easiest part first. You don't have to start at the beginning. Whatever section you can do, do it! If you think that's wimpy, and you would rather do the hardest part first so that you can get it out of the way, that's fine—whatever works for you. If you start writing and you get stuck, write about why you're stuck.
- Talk it out. Try tape-recording yourself speaking the ideas you want to include in the paper, and then transcribe the tape.

Make yourself accountable.

Set a writing deadline (other than the paper's due date) for yourself by making an appointment at the Writing Center or telling your TA (or a former TA) that you're going to give them a draft on such-and-such a date. If you make your Writing Center appointment for several days before the paper is due, then you may be motivated to have a draft finished, in order to make the appointment worthwhile.

Leave your work out.

Keeping your work (books, notes, articles, etc.) physically out, in full view, gives you a reminder that you are in the middle of the paper, or that you need to start. Also, if you write in more than one shift, it can be helpful to leave off in the middle of a paragraph and leave your 'tools' where they are. When you return to the paper, you'll be able to "warm up" by finishing that paragraph. Starting a new section cold may be more difficult.

Work on improving your writing when you don't have a deadline.

Investigate your writing process. First of all, you may not think you have a thing called a "writing process." But you do—everyone does. Describe your writing process in detail.

Ask yourself:

- When do I usually start on a paper?
- What tools do I need (or think I need) in order to write?
- Where do I write?
- Do I like quiet or noise when I write?
- How long a block of time do I need?
- What do I do before I start?
- What do I do at the end?
- How do I feel at the end (after I have turned it in)?

Then ask yourself:

- What do I like about my writing process?
- What do I want to change?

Once you can see your writing process, then you can make a decision to change it. But take it easy with this—only work on one part at a time. Otherwise, you'll get overwhelmed and frustrated—and we all know where that leads, straight down the procrastination road.

Evaluate your writing's strengths and weaknesses.

If you aren't ready to evaluate your writing process completely (and it's okay if you aren't), then you could try just listing your strengths and weaknesses as a writer. For instance, perhaps you are great at creating thesis statements, but you have trouble developing arguments. Or, your papers are very well-organized, but your thesis and argument tend to fall a little flat. Identifying these issues will help you do two things: 1) When you write, you can play to your strength; and 2) You can choose one weakness and do something about it when you DON'T have a deadline.

Now, doing anything when you don't have a deadline may sound strange to a procrastinator, but bear with me. Let's say you've decided that your writing is too wordy, and you want to work on being more concise. So, some time when you don't have a paper—

but you do have a free hour—you waltz into the Writing Center and tell your tutor, "Hey, I want learn how to write more clearly." You confer, and you come away with some simple strategies for eliminating wordiness.

Here is why this may make a difference the next time you write a paper, regardless of whether or not you have procrastinated (again!): You print out your draft. It's 1 a.m. You go to bed. The next morning, you read over your paper (it's due at noon). You say to yourself, "Hmmm, I notice I'm being too wordy." BUT, rather than concluding, "Oh, well, it's too late, there isn't anything I can do about that," (as you may have in the past), you can choose to employ some of what you learned (previously, when you weren't under the gun) to make your writing more concise. You edit the paper accordingly. You turn it in.

When your instructor hands the papers back the following week, there are far fewer instances of "awkward," "unclear," etc. in the margins. Voila! You've made a positive change in your writing process!

What does this have to do with procrastination? Well, making one small change in your writing process creates momentum. You begin to feel more positive about your writing. You begin to be less intimidated by writing assignments. And—eventually—you start them earlier, because they just aren't as big a deal as they used to be.

Evaluating the strengths and weaknesses in your writing gives you a sense of control. Your writing problems are solvable problems. Working on your writing when you don't have a deadline helps you gain insight and momentum. Soon, writing becomes something that, while you may not look forward to it, you don't dread quite as much. Thus, you don't procrastinate quite as much.

This strategy also accounts for the fact that if you perceive procrastination as having been successful for you in the past, you aren't going to give it up right away

Hone your proofreading and editing skills.

If you procrastinate on writing because you don't like to re-read what you have written, the good news is this: you can learn specific proofreading (proofread.html), revising (revision.html), and editing strategies. If you finish your paper ahead of time, and you re-read it, and you don't like it, you have options. Writing a first draft that you don't like doesn't mean you're a terrible writer. Many writers—in fact, I would venture to say most—hate their first drafts. Neither Leo Tolstoy nor Toni Morrison produce(d) brilliant prose the first time around. In fact, Morrison (a big fan of revision) said recently, "You don't have to love it just because you wrote it!" If you practice some revision and editing strategies, you may feel more comfortable with the idea of re-reading your papers. You'll know that if you find weaknesses in the draft (and you will), you can do something to improve those areas.

Learn how to tell time.

One of the best ways to combat procrastination is to develop a more realistic understanding of time. Procrastinators' views of time tend to be fairly unrealistic. "This paper is only going to take me about five hours to write," you think. "Therefore, I don't need to start on it until the night before." What you may be forgetting, however, is that our time is often filled with more activities than we realize. On the night in question, for instance, let's say you go to the gym at 4:45 p.m. You work out (1 hour), take a shower and dress (30 minutes), eat dinner (45 minutes), and go to a sorority meeting (1 hour). By the time you get back to your dorm room to begin work on the paper, it is already 8:00 p.m. But now you need to check your email and return a couple of phone calls. It's 8:30 p.m. before you finally sit down to write the paper. If the paper does indeed take five hours to write, you will be up until 1:30 in the morning—and that doesn't include the time that you will inevitably spend watching TV.

And, as it turns out, it takes about five hours to write a first draft of the essay. You have forgotten to allow time for revision, editing, and proofreading. You get the paper done and turn it in the next morning. But you know it isn't your best work, and you are pretty tired from the late night, and so you make yourself a promise: "Next time, I'll start early!"

Make an un-schedule.

The next time you have a writing deadline, try using an un-schedule to outline a realistic plan for when you will write. An un-schedule is a weekly calendar of all the ways in which your time is already accounted for. When you make an un-schedule, you consider not only your timed commitments such as classes and meetings, but also your untimed activities such as meals, exercise, errands, laundry, time with friends and family, and the like. It is not a list of what you should do in a given week; rather it is an outline of the time that you will necessarily spend doing other things besides writing.

Once you have made your un-schedule, take a look at the blank spaces. These represent the maximum number of hours that you could

potentially spend writing. By starting with these blank spaces as a guide, you will be able to more accurately predict how much time you will be able to write on any given day. You may be able to see, for instance, that you really don't have five hours to spend writing on the night before the paper is due. By planning accordingly, you will not only get a better night's sleep, you may also end up with a better paper!

The un-schedule might also be a good way to get started on a larger writing project, such as a term paper or an honors thesis. You may think that you have "all semester" to get the writing done, but if you really sit down and map out how much time you have available to write on a daily and weekly basis, you will see that you need to get started sooner, rather than later. In addition, the un-schedule may reveal especially busy weeks or months, which will help you budget time for long-term projects.

Perhaps most importantly, the un-schedule can help you examine how you spend your time. You may be surprised at how much (or how little) time you spend watching television, and decide to make a change. It's especially important that you build time for fun activities into your un-schedule. Otherwise, you will procrastinate in order to steal time for relaxation.

You can also use the un-schedule to record your progress towards your goal. Each time you work on your paper, for example, mark it on the un-schedule. One of the most important things you can do to kick the procrastination habit is to reward yourself when you write something, even if (especially if) that writing is only a little piece of the whole. Seeing your success on paper will help reinforce the productive behavior, and you will feel more motivated to write later in the day or week.

Set a time limit.

Okay, so maybe one of the reasons you procrastinate on writing projects is that you just plain hate writing! You would rather be at the dentist than sitting in front of your computer with a blank Microsoft Word document staring you in the face. In that case, it may be helpful to set limits on how much time you will spend writing before you do something else. While the notation "Must work on Hemingway essay all weekend" may not inspire you to sit down and write, "Worked on Hemingway essay for ½ hour" just might. Or, if you tell yourself that you will write "all weekend," for instance, the sheer agony of the thought may keep you from doing any writing at all. If, however, you say that you will write for two hours on Saturday afternoon, you may actually accomplish something. The important thing here is to keep your commitment to yourself. Even if, at the end of the two hours, you think you could keep going, stop. Go outside and enjoy the weather. Your procrastinating self needs to be able to trust your new non-procrastinating self the next time you say you will only write for a certain amount of time. If you go overboard this time, then the next time you say, "I'll write for two hours and then stop," the procrastinator within will respond, "Yeah, right! I'm going rollerblading!"

On the other hand, it may work better for you to trick yourself into working on your paper by telling yourself you're only going to write for two hours, but then continuing to work if you're feeling inspired. Experiment with both approaches and see which one seems to work best for you.

Be realistic about how long it takes you to write.

Procrastinators tend to be heroic about time; they estimate that it will take them two hours to complete a task that would take most people four. Once you have determined that procrastination is hurting your writing, begin taking notice of how long it actually takes you to write. Many students have a "page an hour" rule. Perhaps you can write a page in an hour if you are totally rested, fed, and focused, your roommate isn't home, and the wind is blowing just right. But what if the phone rings, what if you are tired, and what if you have to go to the bathroom? When you estimate how long it will take you to write something, expect that there will be interruptions along the way.

Parting thoughts

As you explore why you procrastinate and experiment with strategies for working differently, don't expect overnight transformation. You developed the procrastination habit over a long period of time; you aren't going to stop magically. But you can change the behavior, bit by bit. If you stop punishing yourself when you procrastinate and start rewarding yourself for your small successes, you will eventually develop new writing habits. And you will get a lot more sleep.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the

handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial (<http://www.lib.unc.edu/instruct/citations/>) .

Burka, Jane B. and Lenora M. Yuen. Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publ. Co., 1983.

Ellis, Albert, and William J. Overcoming Procrastination. New York: Signet Books, 1977.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License.