

# YOUR GUIDE FOR BETTER TIME MANAGEMENT

## 23 TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL PLANNING

PRE-LAW SOCIETY AT VCU

## INTRODUCTION

Time management is key in any student's life, but especially so in the lives of those who are considering pursuing a career in the field of law. Developed time management skills will help you on your path to success by helping you lower your stress levels (for more resources on making your mental health a priority, check out [this](#) other article), get more done in less time, and maintain a healthy work-life balance (check out more info on that last bit [here!](#)). Before we get started, I think it's important to recognize: no matter how well you manage your time, there are only 24 hours in a day. The sooner you can recognize, accept, and internalize this, the better off you will be - and the better with time management you'll be.

## GETTING STARTED

### 1. Do a time audit.

Before you can improve your time management skills, you need to see where exactly they're lacking. Take a day, or even a week, where you pay very close attention to how long tasks take in comparison to how long you think they'll take, and be amazed at the results. The areas with the highest discrepancies are often the areas with the most room for improvement.

### 1. Set goals for your time management - and implement them.

I'm not talking about your to-do list yet. These goals should be things to help you change your behavior, such as "keep a planner", "stop answering texts while working on essays", or "stop wasting so much time doing x". Track these goals over time to see whether or not you're accomplishing them.



### 3. Get organized.

In order to know what you need to do, you have to be organized! This is likely the first step in your time management goals. Whatever this means for you, be it a calendar, sticky notes on your desk, or a daily planner, just make sure it actually works. Use this method to keep track of deadlines and smaller tasks within a larger project.

### 4. Set SMART goals.

Now I'm talking about your to-do list. These goals should be Specific in what you want to accomplish, Measurable, so you know what you're getting done, Attainable and realistic for the resources you have, Relevant to your larger goals, and Timely for the deadlines you may have.



## MAKING YOUR TO-DO LIST

### 5. Prioritize wisely and ruthlessly.

Be brutally honest with yourself in this step. How many tasks can you truly accomplish today, and which ones will they be? It's often helpful to prioritize tasks based on urgency; for example, the paper due tomorrow probably takes precedence over studying for your test two weeks from now. A common trick, known as the Eisenhower matrix, is to look at your current to-do list and determine which tasks are:

- i. Important and urgent ("Do" tasks): You should do these tasks right away.
- ii. Important, but not urgent ("Defer" tasks): You can decide when you should do these tasks based on their respective deadlines.
- iii. Urgent, but not important ("Delegate" tasks): See if you can delegate these tasks or maybe knock them out quickly.
- iv. Neither urgent nor important ("Delete" tasks): Put these at the bottom of your to-do list, or remove them entirely.

### 6. Try the "Swiss Cheese" method.

Big tasks can easily overwhelm you, especially when you don't know where to start. Alan Lakein is credited with the Swiss cheese method, a way of breaking down large projects into smaller tasks or chunks of time. For example, writing one part of a large essay, or reading for 15 minutes instead of trying to tackle the whole book at once. This will make your task easier to handle and help you feel more in control.

### 7. Be a step ahead.

Leaving work until the last minute will often leave you a day late and a dollar short - especially for projects that end up taking more time and effort than you originally planned for. To account for this, try setting an earlier deadline for yourself than the one that is actually true (if your project is due Sunday at midnight, set your goal to be done with it by Saturday at midnight instead). It's important to stick to this deadline and really enforce it - you'll be amazed at the stress it saves you!

# MANAGING YOUR TIME

## 8. Allot your time.

Figure out how much time you need to allot to each task on your to-do list, and set this time aside ahead of time. Doing this will help you plan your time effectively and will help you realize when you simply don't have enough time to accomplish all of the tasks you need to accomplish. Realizing this ahead of time gives you a chance to delegate the task to someone else or ask for help.

## 9. Plan ahead.

Use the knowledge of how long tasks will take to complete to plan ahead and ensure you have an appropriate amount of time to get them done. Often, a good method for this is to plan backwards based on your final deadline. If you know you have a deadline at 6 pm and you must complete tasks A (which will take an hour), B (which will take 30 minutes) and C (which will take 15 minutes) before then, you will want to plan to start work no later than 4 (giving yourself a 15 minute cushion in case anything takes longer than expected). Additionally, you should try to make a habit of planning out tomorrow's to-do list before you go to bed, so you can start the next day ready to go, and try planning out your whole next week every Sunday (or whatever day of the week is your "break" day). When planning your week, try to align your tasks with the way your energy fluctuates throughout the week - if you know you'll be burnt out by Friday, make it an easy day. If you know Tuesdays are your best days, give yourself a lot to do.

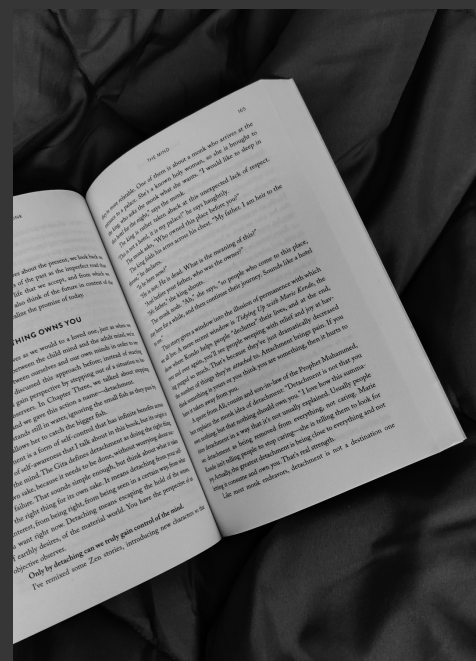
## 10. Limit the time you spend on each task.

Parkinson's law says that tasks will grow to fill the time you allot to them - if you set aside an hour, the task will take you an hour. Reference your time audit from Tip #1 and try to find tasks that are taking longer than you think they should. Next time you do those tasks, set a time limit on them. This will help you focus better and be a more effective worker, as well as help you avoid "scope creep" (when a project isn't well-defined and it expands into your other time allotments). If you still find yourself going over your time limit, try allotting just a little more time next time you do the task, until you find the perfect amount.

# GETTING THINGS DONE

## 11. Start with the tough stuff.

For most people, the first few hours of work are the most productive. Because of this, it's a smart technique to begin your day with your most important and demanding tasks. First thing in the morning is the best time for you to tackle your most grueling to-do's. Not that person? Find out what your golden hour is - record your productivity throughout the day and find your peak. Make this the time when you do the most work!



**12. Schedule breaks in between tasks.**

When you go 90 mph all day without stopping, you're likely to suffer from burnout. It's important to take rest breaks every now and then to allow yourself to recuperate and recover. This will actually help you stay more focused and motivated in the long run. Make sure you're taking a break at least once every 90 minutes. Try spending this free time going for a walk, watching a show you enjoy (one episode!), listening to music, or meditating!

**13. Make the most of your time - all the time.**

Know you have a bus ride or waiting time coming up? Make sure you bring something with you to do! Use down time to take your scheduled break, answer your batch of emails / calls, catch up on some reading, or plan your next steps!

**14. Recognize that, in most cases, done is better than perfect.**

Most professors (and mathematicians, for that matter) will tell you - a 60 is higher than a 0. If you find yourself in a situation where you can't possibly get the whole thing done in time (and you've tried delegating and reaching out for help), accept the situation you're in and do whatever you can. Giving up is the worst thing you can do.

**15. Skip ahead when you get stuck.**

Feeling overwhelmed by a big project? Can't find the right words for your next paragraph? Words blurring together on the page as you try to read? Skip ahead to an easier or different type of task (i.e. writing if you were reading, cleaning if you've been sitting all day, etc). Getting too entrenched in what you're working on will only slow you down. Come back to it later with a fresh face.



## **HABITS - GOOD AND BAD**

**16. Don't reply immediately.**

Emails, phone calls, Zoom invitations... in a 21st-century world we're constantly flooded with incoming communications. Instead of wasting time replying to each one as it comes in, set aside a section of each day to answer everything in one big batch. An allotted section of time to answer everything will help you stay focused during other tasks and save you the time and stress of constantly refreshing your inbox or worrying you'll forget to answer that email.

**17. Leave a buffer between tasks and meetings.**

The human mind needs time to process and clear itself when jumping from one task to another, and it can only focus for about 90 minutes at a time. Scheduling in a buffer as a part of your day can help make sure you're not confused or burnt out when your meeting starts, and is a generally good habit to establish.

**18. Set an agenda and stick to it.**

Before any kind of meeting, set an agenda with your team in advance and stick to it. There should be a clear, shared purpose in everyone's mind before the meeting. Accomplish the goals you set out to accomplish, and let everyone get back to their day. You'll be amazed at how much time you can save!

**19. Learn to say "No."**

You can't do everything, and you can't please everyone. Hopefully by now you're equipped with the tools you need to prioritize your wants and needs, and you can honestly look at a situation and say "No, I can't handle more on my plate," or "No, I just can't go out tonight." It sucks to disappoint people, but it sucks even more to put yourself in a bad position because you couldn't muster the courage to say no.

**10. Organize the rest of your life.**

Having things organized, from your planner to your Google Drive to the bookcase in your room, will help eliminate wasted time in your life. The average American spends 2.5 days every year looking for misplaced items, and we spend over \$2.7 billion annually replacing these items. Taking the time to organize these things now will get rid of wasted time later. With that being said, organizing your bookshelf should not be a "Do" task. Only focus on these goals when nothing more pressing is present.

**21. Break your bad habits.**

Prone to spending an hour every morning laying in bed on your phone, and doing the same before bed? Start small, limiting yourself to only 45 minutes, then less and less over time. Bad at planning? Try setting a to-do list every day, then building up to a planner, etc. Eventually, you can save yourself a lot of time and energy by breaking the bad habits that are holding you back!

**22. On the topic of bad habits - don't multitask.**

Multitasking has been shown to have a negative impact on productivity. Choose one thing to do, set a timer (that aligns with the time you allotted for the task in Tips #7 & 9), and work on only that task until the timer goes off or you finish (whatever comes first). This will not only help you focus, but also improve the quality of your work.

**23. Turn your system into a good habit.**

Whatever time saving tools you devise from the tips above, it's important that they're not just a one-off! Set a long-term schedule that is reasonably maintainable over the long term - 66 days, to be exact (this is how long it takes to form a new habit, according to a study from the European Journal of Social Psychology). Every day, they'll become more and more automatic, until you finally form a new habit. Don't beat yourself up that it's taking a while, or if you miss a step one day. It's going to take a bit - that's just science. What's important to remember is that you can do it, you just have to stick to it!

**THE PRE-LAW SOCIETY AT VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY  
IS A NON-PARTISAN ORGANIZATION BUT PROVIDES A PLATFORM FOR  
MEMBERS TO EXPRESS PERSONAL OPINIONS AND EXPERIENCES. ALL  
INFORMATION POSTED IS STRICTLY FOR EDUCATIONAL AND  
INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES. THE SOCIETY DOES NOT ENDORSE  
THESE VIEWS.**