

Combating Procrastination

A purpose of this handout is to assist students gain more control of their own study habits and the time spent studying. Many students suffer needlessly from procrastination. As a result, these students learn and earn grades far below their potential. The results can be dire in terms of earning a degree, finding a job in their field, and for chances of entering graduate, or professional school. For students who have a desire to face down and overcome procrastination and the academic damage that it wreaks, this handout has been written.

How Knowledge Is Gained

Most would agree that learning involves two things:

1. experience and
2. practice, practice, practice over time

Reading textbooks, listening to lectures, and reviewing class notes are all forms of experience that seem to be essential to learning in college. But it is also true that we must do something with information to be learned in order to make the experiences meaningful and meaningfulness is an important element in learning and remembering. This is most clear in the case of knowing how to do avoid procrastination. We practice athletics, music, art, etc., to develop these skills. It is also true, but perhaps less obvious, in the case of learning and remembering and combating procrastination.

Recitation of Information

We acquire information to be learned in college from textbooks and lectures. The primary goal of most textbooks and lectures is to provide information to be learned and not a focus on how to learn the material. In short, to learn and gain knowledge we must study. We must bring ourselves into contact with the relevant information and we must practice forms of behavior that result in learning.

Why Gain Knowledge?

Okay, so studying involves exposure to information and practicing behaviors that acquire knowledge. This is easy to say, but a little more difficult to do because it takes a plan, effort, and persistence. Something is missing though, and it is this missing something that is at the heart of the problem for many students who put off the requirements of academic success. What is missing is with many procrastinators is the **reason for studying**.

Take a few minutes and write in the spaces below the best reasons you can think of for studying. Be sincere, complete, and brief.

Reasons to Study

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Next, ask if the reason for studying is an immediate reward of studying or is a delayed reward of studying. If the reward is immediate (say, less than one hour) put an "I" to the right of each reason. If the reason is a delayed reward put a "D" to the right of it.

If you want better results from your studying, a good place to begin is to arrange for rewards to follow studying. Many students who do not procrastinate do this automatically and subconsciously. The good news is that even habitual procrastinators can learn to overcome procrastination using rewards. First, how can we use rewards?

An Example of Self-Reinforcement (Rewards)

To complete a Ph.D. degree Tom needed to write dissertation. His reason for completing the degree was clear – the degree increased prospects of finding employment. These were good positive reasons, but they were delayed and required a great deal of work. Tom was having difficulty getting started. He found himself wasting time, putting off writing (and feeling anxious about it).

Finally, Tom approached the problem by setting up some immediate positive rewards for writing that he could earn without large amounts of work.

First, he selected something that he considered pleasant. He selected playing pinball machines (one of his favorite activities). In the next building was an ice cream parlor that had a few pinball machines. Tom was able to play pinball as an immediate reward.

Second, Tom arranged the amount of work required to earn "pinball time" to be small and easily obtainable. He began with a small goal – writing one handwritten page. As he began writing he knew that soon he would be playing pinball. This made it easier to start. As soon as Tom completed one page, he took 25 cents out of his pocket (an immediate reward) and walked to the ice cream parlor, deposited the 25 cents in his favorite machine, and played until his games were finished. Then, he returned to his desk, wrote a second page, took out another 25 cents, and again made a visit to the ice cream parlor. After several days of this system Tom began to "thin out" his rewards (one reason was that he was writing and running out of money quickly!).

Each time Tom finished writing a page he would take out the 25 cents and flip it. If the coin came up "heads", he would go play pinball. If the coin came up "tails", he would write another page. Sometimes Tom had a "lucky streak" of several "heads" in a row, and sometimes the opposite. Now he was writing two pages (on the average) for each trip to the pinball machine. Next, Tom further faded the reward to a ratio of one reward for six pages written by using only the number "1" on a toss of a die. Before he could alter the system further Tom was finished with my dissertation! (Over 100 pages in less than a month!) Since then Tom has used similar systems to get started and finish particular tasks that he found hard to start.

The hardest problem to solve when constructing a self-reward system is finding a way to make the rewards immediate. For example, let's say you are planning to use "going to a movie" as a reward for completing a computer science assignment. Unless your study place is located next to the theatre, it would be impossible to have the reward as an immediate consequence of studying. One way to solve this problem is to use a "token" reward as the immediate reward, and the movie as the "backup" reward. In this example, you could divide the assignment up into meaningful chunks of work (e.g., reading over the assignment to get it clear, making notecards from your text or notes and quizzing yourself over these notecards, solving for problems similar to those that could appear on an exam, etc.). Then as soon as you complete each chunk of work, you drop 25 cents (or so) into a jar. When done, you take the money from the jar and go to the movie.

Let me summarize the major features of a self-reinforcement system:

1. Reward need not be "big" as long as they are positive to you.
2. The rewards or tokens must be an immediate of consequence after studying.
3. The amount of work needed to obtain rewards should be small in the beginning, but may increase as progress is made.
4. It is important that rewards only be earned IF you do the required work. If you cheat on the system you are less likely to obtain your goal.
5. You are the one in charge. If your system begins to break down it is the result of your choices. Make adjustments accordingly.

In the spaces below write in some positive rewards that you could use to increase your studying especially if the task is not your favorite. Try to pick a few in each category listed.



Immediate Rewards (e.g., playing Pinball, watching TV, running, etc.)

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____

Token Rewards (e.g., movie tickets, money dropped in a jar, etc.)

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____

Long term rewards (a certain gpa, a trip, a degree, etc.)

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____

Now select one of your classes that has assignments that you tend to put off or dislike doing. Describe here the behavior you want to increase:

With the above behavior in mind, determine what a reasonable "chunk" of it is. For writing, it may be a page, for reading it may be a section of a chapter, for doing physics problems, it may be completing one problem. This unit of behavior should be specified with you in mind. Don't make it too large –you can always increase after you are successful.

Now describe briefly the reward system that you intend to use in the beginning. Be sure that rewards are immediate. Be sure to state how you will adjust the system of rewards to "fade out" the rewards.



Student Academic Resource Center



If you have questions about procrastination or would like assistance in setting up your system of rewards, make an appointment with the Learning Skills Advisor in the Student Academic Resource Center. 113 Phillips Hall, 407-812-5130