

Overcoming Procrastination:

How to Get Things Done Despite Yourself

By Margaret Spencer Dixon

Everyone procrastinates sometimes. The insidious thing about procrastination is that only you know when you are really procrastinating. Getting a cup of coffee, stopping by a friend's office to chat, or even working industriously on a low-priority project are typical methods of putting things off. Here are some techniques to help procrastinators keep on track.

NINE TECHNIQUES FOR OVERCOMING PROCRASTINATION

1. *Don't try to do it all at once.* All too often, we procrastinate on starting a project because we won't have time to finish the whole thing in one sitting. This kind of all-or-nothing thinking is unhelpful, since we rarely have large chunks of free time miraculously appear before us. See how much you can accomplish by chipping away at a project for 15 or 20 minutes at a time. Appreciate the cumulative value of small chunks of time: 15 minutes every working day adds up to about 55 hours over the course of a year. This simple math can help us see the value of putting even small amounts of time to good use on a daily basis.

2. *Start anywhere.* Starting "at the very beginning – a very good place to start" makes sense when one is singing

a song, which has only one logical place to start. Most work projects, however, have many good places to start, each of which is about as good as the other. Yet frequently we deter ourselves from starting at all because we can't decide on the best place to begin. We lose sight of the fact that just starting anywhere is better than not starting at all. So when you have been procrastinating on a big project, take the first step – just get started anywhere.

3. *Start imperfectly.* Another paralyzing mindset is perfectionism – the belief that everything we do must be outstanding at all times. The early stage of a project is not the time to worry about getting everything right. If you start in plenty of time, you'll be able to edit, rewrite, and double-check facts and citations. One way to crash through the wall of perfectionism is to start with an obvious error, which you will edit out later. Another approach is the letter-writing technique: for example, "Dear Mom, Today at work I'm supposed to be drafting a brief. Let me tell you about the facts of the case..."

4. *The "drive yourself crazy by doing nothing" approach.* Assemble all the materials for the project, arrange them in front of you on your desk, and then sit at your desk and do nothing for seven minutes (by the clock). Don't even write down any of the ideas that are sure to

come to you during this period. By the end of the seven minutes, you'll be itching to start. Incidentally, the reason for *seven* minutes is to make sure that you do sit for seven actual minutes. "Five minutes" or "ten minutes" tend to become concepts rather than actual time periods.

5. *Work no more than 15 minutes at a time.* This is my favorite anti-procrastination method. Set a timer – a wristwatch alarm is a discreet alternative – and decide to work full blast on a project for the next 15 minutes. When the timer goes off, decide immediately whether to stop at that moment, or to reset the timer and work for another 15 minutes. Most of the time, I've built up enough interest in a project after 15 minutes that I don't want to stop when the timer buzzes. I've worked for hours using this method, yet it never feels that long because I know that a break is never more than 15 minutes away.

6. *Start even if you're not in the mood.* Sigmund Freud once said, "When inspiration does not come to me, I go halfway to meet it." You don't have to be inspired to start on something. If you wait for inspiration, you run the risk that it might never come. It's more reliable to train yourself to start to work, then see if the ideas start to flow. Establish the daily habit of settling down to work

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during your usual high-energy periods, so that your muse knows when and where to find you, if it so desires.

7. *Realize that unpleasant tasks don't get any easier over time.* If anything, unpleasant tasks become more so when we put them off. Even worse, the worry over *not* working on a project takes at least as much energy as just getting on with the task. It's like swimming in the ocean when the water's cold: some people prefer to run quickly into the surf and deal with the shock in a few frigid seconds. Others stretch out the agony by stepping in inch by shivering inch. I've finally learned that it's easier to take a deep breath, plunge in, and get the agony over with as soon as possible.

8. *Schedule a "catch-up" day.* Here's a way to attack all those annoying little tasks that are so easy to ignore. A friend of mine tells me that every month or so, she sets aside a day devoted entirely to those tasks. "Those days are tough," she admits, "but you can't imagine how terrific it feels to finally get all those things done."

9. *Honor your leisure time.* Paradoxical though it may sound, making sure you have a reasonable amount of time for rest, relaxation, and just plain fun is one of the best ways to deal with procrastination. It's all too easy to adopt the mindset that we will let ourselves play only after we have finished all our work. However, "work before play" is best applied in a daily or weekly context, not over the course of months or years. Forcing yourself to work all your waking hours for weeks on end – or feeling as if you should be keeping up that pace – leads to inefficiency, stress, depression, and burnout. You can be more productive over the long run if you treat your work life as a marathon rather than a sprint, and pace yourself accordingly. Knowing that you have only a limited amount of time to work, as well as having something fun to look forward to, will help you be more efficient during the time you have allotted to work. Remember how much you managed to get done on the day before your last vacation?



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Margaret Spencer Dixon will present several programs on avoiding procrastination and time management at the Solo and Small Firm Conference, scheduled for June 7-9, 2007 at Osage Beach. For more information about the Solo and Small Firm Conference, log onto www.sasfconference.org. You may register online or call 888/253-6013.