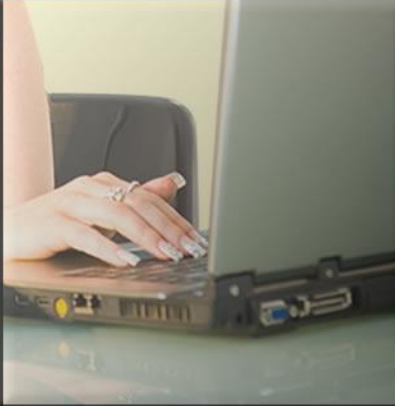# Introduction to Online Learning

Time and Organization Management

Objectives

- Define time management.

- Assess current time and organization management in relation to social, academic, and professional career areas.

- Develop a time management schedule, and prioritize a list of current tasks to be completed.

- Characterize multitasking in relation to anticipating demands, and develop strategies for multiple projects.

- Explain procrastination, review main causes for procrastination, and develop strategies to master procrastination.

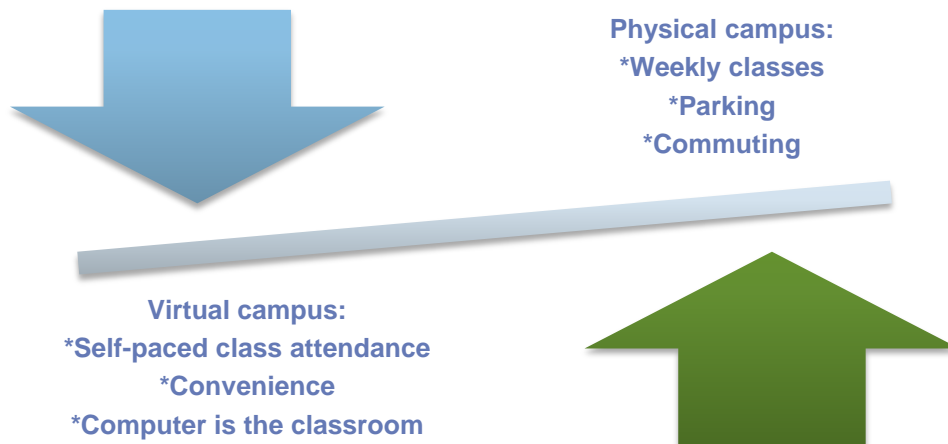- Identify stress management techniques.

Introduction

Time management is an important skill that can benefit you academically, professionally, and personally. Simply put, time management is the way in which you successfully organize and schedule all of the different tasks you must juggle—from keeping up with assignments and readings to fitting in time to clean your house. According to Dianna Van Blerkom (2010), "Time management is the way you regulate or schedule your time" (p. 59). By developing successful strategies to efficiently and effectively use your time, you will not only save time but also learn how to balance various tasks and potentially spend less time studying and more time having fun.
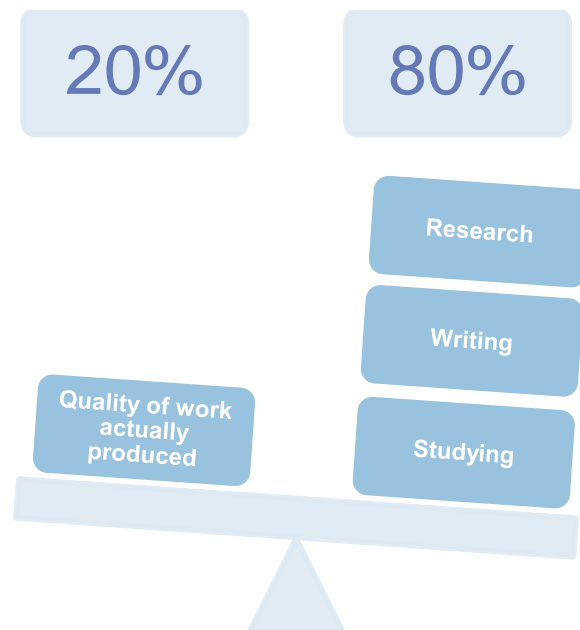
Current Time Management

Unlike high school students or face-to-face college students, distance learners do not have to strategize about how to get to class at a certain time each day. Morgan and Reilly (2002) pointed out that distance learners are free to strategically pace themselves within certain constraints, such as semester or course lengths and assignment due dates (p. 91). Nonetheless, without the daily schedule of attending on-campus classes, distance learners must efficiently manage their time so they do not fall behind in their classes.

Physical campus:
*Weekly classes
*Parking
*Commuting

Virtual campus:
*Self-paced class attendance
*Convenience
*Computer is the classroom

The first step in developing an effective time management plan involves analyzing your current time management practices. To do this, start by keeping a **time log**, or a record of what you do *each hour* for a week. This will give you an accurate picture of how much time you spend on particular activities and, perhaps, reveal some inefficiencies in your current practices. Make sure you record your productivity in intervals rather than all at the end of the day when you may have difficulty accurately recalling what you did and when you did it.

If you are a full-time student, plan to allot about 56 hours of your time management schedule to each of the following: sleeping, academic work, and the rest of your life. As Van Blerkom (2010)

noted, "Looking realistically at how you're using your time now can help you make some necessary changes to be more successful in college" (p. 60). If you have perfectionist tendencies, you may need to realize that you cannot spend too much of your time on one project. On the other hand, you may find that you do not prefer to tackle projects as they arise. Most students, whether online or traditional, do not allocate enough preparation time in their academic study time. Consider the quality of your work versus the quantity of the effort you put into producing the final product. Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto's 80/20 rule known as Pareto's Principle reflects this concept (Hamilton, 2010):

20%	80%

Research

Writing

Quality of work actually produced

Studying

In addition to preparing a time management plan, you must analyze how well you can stick to the schedule you make for each day. To objectively analyze your ability to follow through, create a **prospective-retrospective calendar** and record what you plan to do on a given day and what you actually accomplish (Van Blerkom, 2010, p. 60).

1. Note your current committed activities (i.e., work).

2. Identify your available study time.

3. Determine your weekly calendar changes if necessary.

4. Total your available study time.

Van Blerkom, 2010, p. 60

Finally, you absolutely must determine how much time you realistically have available for studying (Van Blerkom, 2010, p. 60). To do this, first ascertain how much of your time you have already committed to another activity. **Fixed commitments** are activities that you do regularly on the same day of the week or just every week, such as classes, sleeping, and eating. Next, determine the chunks of time you have available for studying. These blocks of time may have a pattern and regularity to them. For example, you may find that you can study between classes every Tuesday and Thursday between 1:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m. Note which days allow you a significant amount of study time and which days allow you much less time, and use this information to help you schedule your regular study time.

If your schedule changes constantly due to other commitments, such as work, then make sure you have a fixed commitment calendar for each week of the school term and fill it in as soon as you receive your work schedule. Lastly, add up all of your available study hours. This will give you an idea of how efficiently you will have to budget your time to ensure that you successfully meet all of your commitments.

Effective Time Management Scheduling

Now that you have determined your fixed commitments, you must ascertain how much time you actually need to study. To figure out the minimum number of hours you will need to study each week, multiply the number of credits you are taking by 2. Thus, if you are taking four classes that provide 4 credits each, you will need 32 hours per week, at least, to devote to studying (Van Blerkom, 2010, p. 63). While you may only need 32 hours each week to effectively study for four classes that are 4 credits each, other factors may alter the number of hours you need to dedicate to your studies.

Factors such as how well you time manage yourself and the difficulty of your classes may require you to change the number of hours you need for studying (Van Blerkom, 2010, p. 63). For example, difficult classes will require you to increase your devoted study time. Additionally, even if a class does not have a reputation of being extremely difficult, you may find it challenging; therefore, you must evaluate the difficulty level of your classes based on your individual strengths and weaknesses (Van Blerkom, 2010, p. 63).
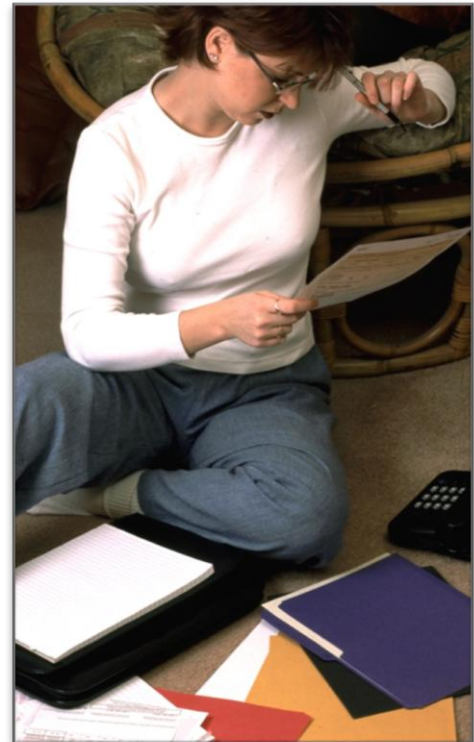
A study conducted by Brown and Liedholm (2002) found that online students tend to spend less time studying than students in a traditional classroom do. Half of distance educations students who participated in the study reported that they spent 0 to 3 hours per week on their courses (p. 5). The following chart lists additional behaviors that distance education students sometimes exhibit but should avoid to successfully complete their online courses (Iyer, 2002, p.101):

Waiting more than 3 days to log onto the course	Students miss valuable time previewing the course contents, including the syllabus and study resources.
Skipping the first day of online class	Students miss instructor office hour instructions, review of the course syllabus, and perhaps even an initial class Q & A chat.
Logging on "infrequently" or for short periods of time	Students attempt to work in their spare time, but they do not realize that instructors often determine course attendance by chat and discussion board participation.
Logging into the course at the end of the course term	Students fail to understand that waiting until the end of the course to participate equates to not showing up in a face-to-face classroom.

In addition to the number of credits you take, the difficulty level of your classes, and the final grade you wish to achieve, you must also consider other individual characteristics that may affect your studying, such as how long you need to complete you assignments. Some people can read quickly, while others take longer to read comprehensively. Therefore, you will likely find it helpful to gauge approximately how long it takes you to read 10 pages of text so that you will know roughly how much time you need to devote to reading assignments of various lengths.

Manageable online coursework

Overwhelmed online coursework

Too many personal commitments

Reading ability

Too many extracurricular activities

Difficulty of classes

Computer problems
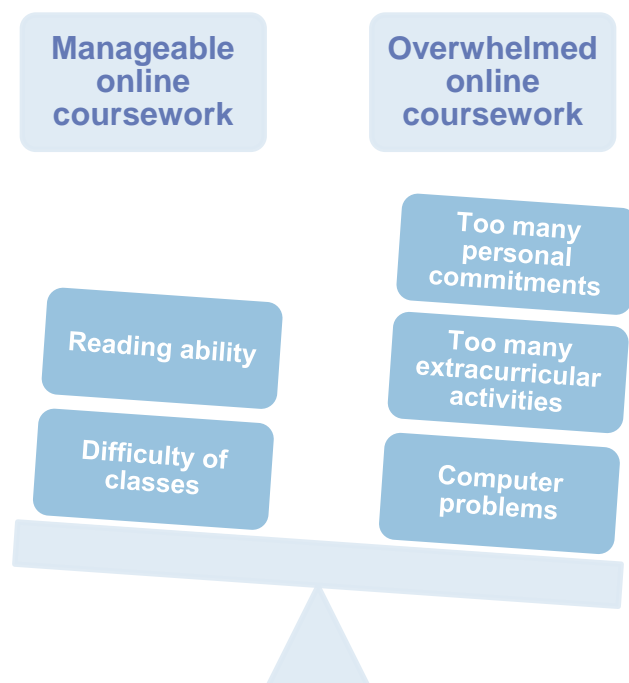
Ultimately, after reviewing course difficulty and creating a **fixed commitment** schedule, you may find that you are overloaded and do not have the time you need to successfully complete

all of your assignments and participate in all of your commitments. When this happens, you need to evaluate areas in which you can reduce your commitments. For example, you could reduce your course load, reduce your work hours, or reduce your extracurricular activities (Van Blerkom, 2010, p. 66).

A good time to reevaluate your commitments is after you take your first exam. Reevaluating at this point will help you measure whether or not you are committing enough time to your studies to enable you to reach your goals and succeed.

> **Can you figure out where your time goes each day? Try tracking a 24-hour day. Write down everything you do in a single day, and note which time(s) you seem the most prone to avoiding your work (Hamilton, 2010).**

Organizing Your Study Time

An **assignment calendar** will help you plan your study time so that you can appropriately schedule all of your assignments (reading and graded), quizzes, and exams. Your assignment calendar should graphically define what assignments you need to finish on a given day of a given month (include all days of the month on the same table) for all of your classes.

> **The University of Minnesota Libraries has developed *The Assignment Calculator* at http://www.lib.umn.edu/help/calculator/. Pick the subject of your assignment, and the calculator will generate detailed weekly due dates.**

Use an Excel spreadsheet to create a calendar so you can write down all of the assignments and exams listed on your course syllabi. When you write your exams, make sure you use all capital letters, highlight them, and put a border around them so they will catch your eye first when you look at your calendar. Do this for each month of the term, and then put the calendar in an easily viewable place so that you will never miss an important event.

Your institution's learning management system likely has a calendar tool available in its homepage or course shell. You can easily set up calendar appointments to remind yourself of important academic or other commitments.

Example of Moodle™ calendar tool

Distance learning requires a high level of discipline and self-direction. Independent study of this nature demands that you dedicate enough time each week to complete your assignments. When researchers surveyed distance learners who successfully completed their courses, they found that 24% of respondents viewed their time management and planning skills as excellent and 42% of respondents viewed their time management as above average (Nash, 2005). In addition, Nonis and Hudson (2010) found that study time had more of an impact on academic performance when students had a high ability to concentrate (p. 229-238). Therefore, to succeed in managing time in a distance learning program, students should not do homework while at work or during chaotic personal times of the day.

Multitasking

One difficulty that students face involves knowing how to balance personal and professional tasks that are due around the same time or even at exactly the same time (i.e., **multitasking**). This can feel especially stressful when the assignments that overlap hold roughly the same importance in each class (two midterms, for example). Juggling multiple tasks can prove difficult because you do not want to sacrifice one assignment so that you can do well on the other. Thus, you must make a plan for how you will tackle this obstacle so that you can successfully complete all of your work.

You will want to begin by making a plan for each of your significant assignments. Start by designating a separate sheet for each assignment that includes the project title and due date. Then, break the project down into smaller components that you can work on just like you did when you created your action plan (Van Blerkom, 2010, p. 73). Finally, determine target days for each step and mark them on your assignment calendar, treating them as firm due dates.

Several mobile applications can help you keep track of your day-to-day activities. The following table lists a few of these applications:

Bunk Bazaar for Mobile	http://www.getjar.com/mobile/34221/bunk-bazaar/	Helps manage your class attendance
Neatcall	http://www.getjar.com/mobile/41057/neatcall-android/	Finds the optimal time slot for any interaction you would like to have with your colleagues
MobyToday	http://www.getjar.com/mobile/8688/mobytoday/	Helps keep track of your upcoming appointments and tasks
GoogaSync for Mobile	http://www.getjar.com/mobile/31540/googasync/	Syncs your personal Google calendar or hosted Google apps calendar with your Symbian mobile phone

Once you have figured out what you must do and when you must do it by, you must develop a plan for when you will actually do the assignment. You can organize your assignments in a variety of ways: You can alternate assignments from day to day, work on various assignments

at different times of the day, or work on each task on a specific day of the week (e.g., Monday is foreign language; Tuesday is English) [Van Blerkom, 2010, p. 76].

Make sure you allocate your time wisely and prioritize you work. At times, you may find it is more prudent to sacrifice an assignment that counts for little of your grade in favor of spending more time on an assignment that counts for a more significant piece of your grade, such as 25% of it (Van Blerkom, 2005, p. 76). This may seem counterintuitive and obviously should only take place in extremely sticky situations; however, it is better to prioritize based on the weight of an assignment for a particular class than to spread yourself too thin and not do well on either assignment, especially on an assignment that counts for 25% of your overall grade.

Use short spurts of time to check your school or personal e-mail to so that your e-mail inbox will not overflow. Keep in mind that your school will send all important school memos and announcements through your institutional Outlook e-mail. These Outlook e-mail inboxes have limited storage space, so your inbox will use up all of its allotted storage quickly if you do not take the time on a daily basis to review your school inbox.

Procrastination

One can sum up **procrastination** as a tendency to put off working on assignments or projects until a later time. This is a common behavior amongst students, particularly when they face a difficult task (Van Blerkom, 2010, p. 78). Students procrastinate for many different reasons, including because they are frustrated, because they lack motivation, or because they have not managed their time wisely. While everyone faces procrastination at various times in their life and in their coursework, certain strategies can help you overcome the urge to procrastinate, keeping you on pace with your action plan and helping to ensure your success. Avoid making excuses for not completing your work. Some excuses are legitimate (e.g., a death in the family); however, many excuses provide only partial explanation for why students claim they cannot complete their work (Hamilton, 2010).

The flexibility of distance education also opens opportunities for procrastination. The following table lists some of the inherent procrastination problems that distance learners face (Tattersall, Waterink, Hoppener, & Koper, 2006):

Problem	Consequence
Distance learners can freely determine when they will start a program of study.	It is difficult to predetermine how long it will take them to complete their academic study for completion of their degree.
Distance learners can suspend their learning over long periods of time.	Stopping and starting coursework over a period of time will add to the time it will take them to complete their degree—if they do at all.

Several strategies can help you overcome the temptation to procrastinate. The following table discusses the more common procrastination problems and some solutions (Van Blerkom, 2010, p. 81):

Set realistic goals.	This may include setting up an online chat with your instructor or academic advisor to discuss how your courses align with your degree completion.
Clarify directions.	Whether this includes registering and properly documenting or completing assignments, ask questions to clarify all expectations.
Start with the easiest task.	Complete easier tasks during non-peak study times.
Avoid overscheduling.	Use Outlook e-mail, Excel spreadsheets, and mobile calendar applications to avoid double-booking yourself.
Create to-do lists.	Placing tasks in writing provides a visual and mental note and helps you strengthen your commitment to complete the tasks.
Break down large tasks.	Aside from creating efficiency, this step will also help you avoid procrastination.
Minimize escapist activities.	Eliminate activities that sidetrack goal completion (e.g., cleaning the house, doing laundry).

Stress Management

Stress is not necessarily bad. In fact, the right amount of stress will keep you on your toes and, in the case of your studies, make sure you are aware of your responsibilities. Too much stress, however, can negatively affect your physical and mental health. Distance learners must balance work and personal lives in a self-paced environment that does not lend itself to a community of users like the physical campus does. Unlike students in the face-to-face classroom, distance learners must seek out resources for stress prevention through a virtual medium. Fortunately, many institutions recognize this problem and now offer a virtual component to their physical campus support services, such as a library and tutoring and counseling centers.

Take Action

This is an immediate short-term solution.

Eliminate unnecessary personal or extracurricular activities.

Contact your instructor if you fall behind or have course problems.

Seek Support

This is a long-term solution.

Set up a discussion board or chat with course classmates to discuss obtsacles.

Contact campus support services via their Web sites.

When faced with too much stress, take initial action by controlling how you use your time (Van Blerkom, 2010, p. 30). Often, this means eliminating unnecessary personal or extracurricular appointments. If stress begins to impact your course work and you fall behind, contact your instructor immediately. In many situations, an instructor will work with you to help you catch up without withdrawing from the course. You can also discuss with your instructor any questions or issues you have with the course content. In addition, you can consider ways to release you tension, such as through exercise, meditation, yoga, and music.

Long-term stress management strategies include organizing a class chat or discussion board so that you and your classmates can discuss class-related and even non-class-related items. Your course instructor may also set a weekly chat or discussion for your course. In certain situations, stress may be related to academics. For those situations, most institutions require their campus support services to maintain a Web site and e-mail address for student use 24/7/365. One innovative campus support service is the virtual student union that Western Governors University developed, which includes not only a café board on which the school posts campus special events but also student access to the online bookstore, career and academic counseling, and financial aid information (Aoki & Pogroszewski, 1998).

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Glossary

Assignment calendar: A calendar that lists all of your assignments (in all classes) and respective due dates for a month.

Fixed commitments: Activities that you participate in regularly, on the same day of the week or just every week, that occur at a specific time and require a fixed amount of time to participate in, such as attending class, playing intramural sports, eating, etc.

Multitasking: Balancing multiple projects with similar due dates or the same due date and working on them at roughly the same time/within the same timeframe.

Procrastination: The tendency to put off working on an assignment or project until a later time when you can work on it now.

Prospective-retrospective calendar: A calendar that incorporates what you plan to do on a given day (prospective) and then accounts for what you actually did on that day (retrospective).

Time log: A record of what you do each hour for a week; it can give you an objective picture of how much time you spend on particular activities.

Time management: The way in which you organize and schedule all of the different tasks you must juggle—from keeping up with assignments to keeping up with housework.

To-do list: A list that enumerates the specific tasks you want to complete on a given day.