

Backwards Planning: The Key to Beating Procrastination

Backwards planning is a time management strategy designed to decrease the likelihood of the procrastination/cram cycle. It works like this:

Steps:

1. On a monthly calendar, write down all of the deadlines for your assignments (this includes, weekly readings, home work, quizzes, essays, exams, projects, etc.)
2. On the study planner write down each assignment and course, and then list the steps that you must follow to complete the assignment (see attached study planner for examples).
3. Then, plot those steps **BACKWARDS** on the calendar, assigning the **LAST** step to the day before the assignment is due. Continue to move up your list, plotting one or two steps on each day, until you have assigned all the steps to various dates on the calendar (see attached monthly calendar for examples).
4. Move on to your next assignment and repeat step #3. It's usually a good idea to plan your last assignment first.

Tips:

1. One key to successful backwards planning is step #2. **You must break down your assignments into small, realistic tasks, or you won't be motivated to complete them.** For example, if you have an essay due in one week, your first task should not be "write a rough draft" (too broad), but rather "pick a topic." Likewise, "study for western civ" or "read over my notes" are too general. Consider exactly what tasks are involved in preparing for the assignment. If you have trouble with this step, make an appointment with the Learning Skills Specialist immediately.
2. Another important key to successful backwards planning is that you **plan IN ADVANCE!** Ideally, you should plot out the steps for a month's worth of assignments. But even planning for the next two weeks will make a difference.
3. Take note of heavy weeks, when you have multiple exams/projects due. **Make sure that if you plan to complete certain steps on certain days that you actually have the time to accomplish these steps.** For example, if you have listed a variety of steps for different assignments on a Saturday, but you work from 1pm-7pm on Saturdays, you must figure out how much time you need to accomplish each step. **If you can't fit it all in, move some of the steps BACKWARDS** to Friday or Thursday: don't push the steps forward to Sunday.
4. **Be realistic.** Don't set up a power study session on a Friday night when you know you have tickets to a concert. Allow extra time to accomplish tasks (give yourself 1 hour to read half a chapter in Macro, not 1/2 an hour).

Backwards planning works because it forces you to create internal deadlines, and because it only asks that you do the bare minimum each day to complete an assignment. Think about it: it's like deciding whether to jump to the 10th floor or take the steps. If you jump, you're likely to get exhausted and discouraged and probably will give up. If you take the steps, you'll reach the tenth floor and still have energy left.