

Understanding Procrastination and Managing Time  
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Virginia Valian, 2003

Procrastination can occur in any area of one's life, from writing to class preparation to planning a trip to making doctor's appointments. One useful way to get a handle on the psychology of one's own procrastination is to compare occasions that were (and are) at least relatively procrastination-free with those that were (and are) procrastination-rich. I have never met anyone who lives a completely procrastination-free life. Procrastination is a "solution" to many different problems. Which problem is in the fore differs from time to time, but any kind of work is a magnet for a wide range of anxieties. There are people for whom work and writing are anxiety-free, but they are a minority. Everybody else is developing methods to cope with the anxiety that work attracts.

One reason, in my view, that people have research teams, large laboratories, and collaborators, is to circumvent procrastination. It takes talent to create a high-functioning research team; not everyone can do it. But it is a way of creating external reasons for initiating and completing work. Working with other people entails responsibilities and obligations that help to bypass the anxieties that would otherwise create delays. Such people look and are productive, but that is partly because they have created an animal that must be regularly fed. They have a socially desirable way of coping with the anxieties that go along with work, a way that does not look like a crutch.

To create other, short-term, solutions, people may have to do things that they feel foolish doing, things that seem to be a crutch, such as working 5 minutes on a task or asking a friend to be available for a brief talk when one's foray at the task is over. But those are simply other forms of aid. Some aids are familiar or have the sanction of social acceptability. But their aim is the same: create conditions that make productive work easier. The one test for an aid is whether or not it helps you work. If it does, it's a good aid. If it doesn't, it may be a good aid for someone else, but it's not a good aid for you. Your job is to figure out what good aids are for you.

Tips on managing time can help reduce procrastination. David Allen's "Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity" has a number of good tips (even if the title is hyperbolic). For me, the most helpful tip was the idea of having *action steps* associated with each project. Part of what makes it difficult to embark on a task is not knowing what to do next. Action steps allow you to create *next actions* for any project.

Keeping a log and reviewing one's progress on a steady basis together help the twin goals of spending more time working (on the assumption that some of your time is wasted) and working more effectively and efficiently (on the assumption that you might sometimes put in a lot of time but accomplish very little). Logs let you see how much time you are devoting to your work, which may be a surprising figure. Progress reviews let you see how effectively you are spending your work time. Both should help you develop ways of becoming more realistic about your goals.