

Seven Suggestions for Managing your time

The feeling of having too much to do and too little time to do it is endemic in our culture and unlikely to go away. We can be energised by some pressure to get things done but when demands on our time feel relentless and out of control we suffer and so does our work. Staff Development run a popular [Information Overload](#) course and other programmes to help people get back in control.

1 Spend your best energy wisely

Energy levels rise and fall throughout the day so consider when you are most alert and creative and save these peak times for the important things. Most of us have higher energy levels in the morning which slump after lunch and pick up later in the afternoon. If this is your pattern then see what happens if you save your peak morning time for your most challenging and important work (thinking, writing, experimenting) and schedule admin tasks (most emails, paperwork, routine jobs) for the afternoon. Our energy tends to pick up when we meet with other people so scheduling meetings for the afternoon can also protect your mornings. Thinking is one of most important things you do as an academic so schedule time for thinking and safeguard it.

2 Spend time writing

Writing is not the same as thinking. Thinking about a paper can be helpful, writing it is essential. Most people struggle with writing. Try scheduling writing time and sticking to it. This could be 30 minutes a day, an hour first thing in the morning, an afternoon a week, a week once a month, whatever works for you. Take the pressure off yourself to write something brilliant by embracing the concept of the 'rubbishy first draft' and just getting ideas written down on the paper in front of you. A [Staff Development online resource for researchers](#) looks at how to do this in more detail. You can block time to write alone, or write together with your group (all of you working on your own writing at the same time). Think about what you need from your physical environment and find silence, background hubbub, music, company or whatever helps you get pen to paper.

3 Group like-tasks together

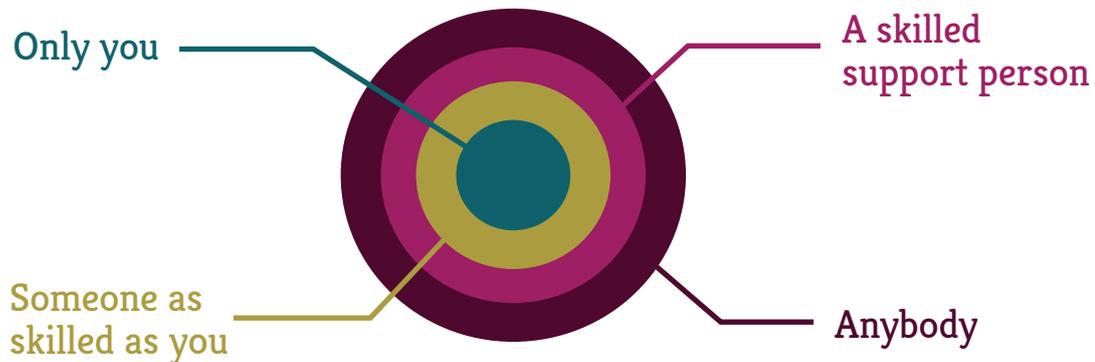
One of the things that erodes our time, especially when we are stressed, is flitting from one task to another. When you are taking control of your to-do list, try grouping similar tasks together and blitzing them in one go, so a chunk of time is allocated to clear emails, to phone calls, to paperwork and so on. In his excellent short book *Do It Tomorrow*, Mark Forster offers a number of practical ways of using lists and other techniques for keeping control of your time. One of the best is to stick to whatever you have planned for today and put any incoming tasks in the diary for another time.

4 Manage interruptions

Control your email by turning it off when you are working on something else. Use your out-of-office responder to let people know when you will be reading and responding to your email and how to reach you with anything that can't wait. Most people start their day by turning on their email. If you do this, just notice whether the messages you read there then set the agenda for your day. If you don't have a plan for your day then you can be sure that your emails will create one for you. Have a line prepared for visitors or callers who interrupt you; be ready to say when you will be able to give them your full attention. Let people know when you are unavailable and respect your own boundaries. If you don't, neither will anybody else.

5 Delegate

If we never delegate anything then either our task list expands exponentially to take over our life or we stagnate and never take on new directions and challenges. Delegating is difficult because we believe that we can do things better, quicker and more reliably than someone else. This might be true for some tasks but not all of them. Take a look at these concentric circles – the inner circle is work that you and only you can do (like your own publications) - things in this inner circle can't be delegated at all. The next circle contains things that can only be done by people as skilled as you but not necessarily you (like peer reviewing a paper). The next are things that can be done by skilled support people, and the last category could be done by anybody.



Ask yourself what you are doing that could be done by other people and start with the outer categories. Could you get yourself a cleaner to keep on top of the house so you get to recharge by doing something you love? Could you delegate an admin task to a support person who might enjoy taking this on? Could you rotate responsibility with some trusted colleagues for peer reviewing others' grant applications?

6 Ask what's important (and say no to what isn't)

In his best-selling book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey describes effective leadership as 'putting first things first'. Covey suggests that many of us suffer from urgency addiction – a compulsion to get pressing things done and crossed off a list – and this prevents us from giving time to things that are important but do not have an immediate time pressure associated with them. Establishing what is important will help you to say no to things that are not. We have many complex reasons for saying yes to things that are not important to us and exploring our resistance to saying no can be very fruitful; consider a coaching session with a [staff counsellor](#). Neither does your answer always need to be 'yes' or 'no', there may be room to negotiate which parts of a request you can help with or what could be dropped to accommodate it.

7 Use the phone

The telephone is underused in the academic environment. It is time to reclaim it! The telephone offers the potential for immediate answers instead of email trails, to convey tone and meaning with the use of your voice and can save you travel time to meetings. Conference calls are easy to arrange so that you have several participants speaking together. The University has a [conference call facility](#) you can use for up to six people. For more you might need to look for an [external provider](#) that can give you a number to dial into. These conference calls are particularly effective once you know the people involved well and have established a relationship with them. This can save you even more travel time if you can use it to reduce meetings.

"Either you run the day or the day runs you." [Jim Rohn](#)