2. Planning your Timetable

Now that you’ve got a clear idea of the way you use your time, you’re more aware of the sort of adjustments you need to make. With this in mind you can now take another copy of the 24 hour timetable and this time compile what you believe is likely to be the best use of your time, which will ensure you get the most out of your abilities. You will need to keep in mind the points we’ve already made as you work your way through the following steps:

**Step 1: Regular activities**

The first step is to enter onto the timetable all the normal routine things you do each week – things like family commitments, meal times, the hours of sleep you normally need, regular social activities, daily travel, part-time work, and so on. You can also enter your regular class times: the lectures, seminars and tutorials that you have to attend each week.

**Step 2: How much study time?**

Next you should ask yourself how many hours each day you’re going to study. At present this might seem like asking you how long is a piece of string: you study as long as you have to. And there will be times when you have to go over your timetabled limit. But you do need to set yourself boundaries, otherwise Parkinson’s Law will take over and there will be no limits to the time you work. You’ll use your time wastefully and experience all the frustration and stress we’ve already talked about.

As a general rule, set yourself around six hours of private study a day. On days when you have no classes, or you’re not at work, you might be able to do more than this. But be careful: any more than six or eight hours and you’ll find it difficult to recover for the next day. This doesn’t just mean that you’ll feel tired and jaded the next day, which, of course, is more than likely; but, equally important, your mind may not have been able to process successfully everything you gave it to do the day before. As a result, when you come to access it, you’re likely to find a jumble of ideas, poorly organised, that you can’t quite remember with the accuracy that you’d like to.

* Decide how many hours you will study each day, otherwise Parkinson’s Law will take over.
* Make sure you have enough time, but don't work too many hours, otherwise you will find the next day that you haven’t processed what you did the day before.
* You will find you cannot recall it accurately in an organised way.

**Step 3: Relaxation**

For this reason relaxation needs to be planned just as carefully as work. Choose the times in the week when you will relax and the times when you will study. Remember that you’re trying to create the right balance between work and relaxation, otherwise, as we’ve just seen, you won’t leave your mind sufficient time to process everything. With this in mind, choose one day a week to have off from work, when you can have a complete break. You probably need to plan this day almost as much as you need to plan the rest of your timetable. You’re working much harder, so you need to relax much harder too.

The same applies to rest periods throughout the week. If you can see that you have a long and tiring day, try to plan to do something in the evening that you’ll find relaxing. You might belong to a club that you attend at that time each week, or you may have a regular date with a friend to go to the cinema or go out for dinner. This may be the time to plan the physical exercise that you might otherwise find difficult to squeeze in, perhaps at the local gym or swimming pool. But, like your day off, don’t leave this unplanned: decide now what you’re going to do at these times.

Decide …

* When you will have one day’s complete break.
* How you will use it.
* When you will have rest periods throughout the week.
* How you will relax at the end of the day.

**Step 4: Plotting the times**

**4.1 The work requiring the highest levels of concentration**

With all your other activities plotted onto your timetable you can now plot the times for your private study. The first step is to decide when you work best and at these times plot the work that calls for the highest levels of concentration – reading, analysing and brainstorming questions, planning, and writing the essay. As you do this, keep in mind the two most important reasons for planning your timetable:

1. To plot each stage of essay writing so that you have sufficient time to develop the skills involved in each of these stages;

2. And to allow your subconscious mind the time to process the material you’ve read and develop ideas of your own.

**4.2 The five stages of essay writing**

Therefore, you will need a timetable that makes certain you’ll be working on all five stages at the most suitable times, week in, week out. It must get you to work in a routine, predictable way.

It might be that you are regularly set an essay every Friday to be handed in on the following Friday. Given this, you would plot on Saturday morning, say, an hour when you can interpret and brainstorm the question. With Sunday off, this gives your subconscious time to process the ideas and throw up new insights for you to pursue on Monday, when you get back to work. Monday and Tuesday, then, would be devoted to research. On Wednesday you could plan your essay, leaving it overnight so that you can add new ideas the following day before you start to write. On Thursday you write the essay, and then on Friday you revise it and print it off to be handed in.

If you’re set an essay every week, you will only need to work on one copy of the timetable. But you may be working on a two- or three-week cycle, in which case you’ll need to be plotting your work on two or three copies. Either way, as long as this is a routine and settled way of working, you can plot each stage over your cycle and always know what you should be doing and when, confident that you’re working at the best time and getting the most out of your abilities.

Decide …

* When you will plot the work requiring the highest levels of concentration so that you do it at those times when you work best.
* When you will plot each of the five stages so that you do them routinely at the same time.

**4.3 The rest of your work**

**Variety**

After you’ve done this you will be ready to plot the other work you’ve got to do, bearing in mind that most of us are helped by having some variety in our working day. Taking notes, reading or writing for long periods can be very tiring. We need rest periods and changes of activity to maintain our efficiency levels. The same applies if you’re working on just one of the subjects you’re studying. It helps if you can create variety by working on more than one each day. In this way you’re better able to return to each subject with your ideas fully processed and a level of detachment that helps you see things more clearly.

Nevertheless, too much variety and too many changes of activities can be confusing. It splinters and fragments our work, making it difficult to see all the contrasts and connections, and to develop the depth of understanding that comes from sustained work. So you will need to create the right balance between the activities and between the subjects you’re studying to make each day both interesting and productive.

* Create some variety in your timetable to give your mind time to process the material.
* It will also give you a level of detachment to help you see things more clearly.
* But get the balance right: too much variety fragments our work and can be confusing.

**Sufficient time between each session**

For the same reasons, try to give yourself sufficient time to process the ideas between each session on a particular subject or activity, so you can use the ideas convincingly. In effect you’re timetabling not just to make sure you do everything you have to, but, more important, to ensure that you develop the best understanding of your subjects. This is a cumulative process, in which we build on what we’ve already achieved until we understand a topic well, and can recall and control the ideas confidently. It’s likely to take a number of sessions of reading, note-taking and thinking until we’re sure we have the ideas under our control.

In view of the importance of giving ourselves time to digest and process the ideas, try to divide up each study session into manageable periods of, say, two hours, with relaxation in between. This might be just a thirty-minute break while you have coffee with friends, but it will give your mind time to process and organise the ideas, helping you to see them with greater clarity and objectivity. As a result, you’ll find that you’re now able to criticise, discuss and evaluate the ideas you’ve read, rather than just absorb them uncritically. However, the break should not be too long, otherwise you’ll waste time by having to go through the warming up stage again as you re-read passages to get back into the ideas.

* Give yourself sufficient time to process the ideas between each session on a particular subject or activity.
* Remember this is a cumulative process in which you build in one session on what you did in the last.
* So divide up study sessions into manageable periods of, say, two hours, with relaxation in between.
* This will help you see your ideas with greater clarity and objectivity.

**Be specific**

Finally, as you construct your timetable be as specific as possible. The timetables that work least well are those that are vague, that lack specific detail. If we are unsure about the time a task should take, Parkinson’s Law will take over and we’ll find we’re working too long, having insufficient breaks and getting done only a fraction of what we could have done.

To avoid these problems be as specific as you can: about the number of hours you will work each week and each day; about the length of each session, so that you always work at your peak efficiency and you have enough breaks; and about the time each task should take you. Make sure you’re clear about the subject you’re going to be studying, and the activity of each study period – reading, note-taking, planning, writing and so on.

And, equally important, try to be specific about your relaxation. Don’t underestimate the importance of giving yourself a clear goal to work to: a treat to enjoy at the end of your work as a reward for the hard work you’ve done. You’ll be less likely to search for any diversion that will take you away from your studies to relieve the burden of unstructured hours of work. You will find yourself wasting less time urgently sharpening pencils or strolling along your bookshelves allowing your attention to be grabbed by just about anything that might be there.

Be as specific as you can about …

1. The number of hours you work each day.

2. The length of each session.

3. The time each task should take.

4. The subject you will be studying.

5. The activity of each study period.

6. Your relaxation at the end of your work

– it will help your motivation and

concentration to have a treat at the end.

What’s more, plan to do something that marks a clear contrast with your work. If you’ve been reading for two hours, it may not be the best form of relaxation to give yourself an hour off to read a novel you’re half way through, even though it might be thoroughly engrossing. It might be better to do some exercise, go for a run, or a swim, or just go for a walk. Or you might do something creative, like playing music, sketching, or painting. You might work on your car, or start building a bookcase in your study. The point is if you’re working harder, you must play harder; and if this means that you plan your work, then you must plan your play too.

**In a nutshell**

• Decide how many hours each day you’re going to study.

• Plan your relaxation – the right balance between work and relaxation.

• Decide when you work best – plot work that calls for the highest levels of concentration.

• Plot each of the five stages of essay writing.

• Make sure you have enough variety between the subjects and activities in each day – but don’t fragment your work too much.

• Give yourself time between each session to process the ideas so you can use them convincingly.

• Divide each session into manageable periods of, say, two hours, with breaks in between.

• Be specific – about the time for study each day/week, the length of each session, the time a task should take, the subject and activity of each session, and relaxation.

**Exercise**

Plan your own timetable

Take a copy of the 24 hour timetable or two or three copies if you’re working on a two- or three-week cycle. Work your way carefully through each of the four stages above, taking particular care to be as specific as you can about times and activities. When you’ve completed this, check it against the eight-point checklist above.

Then work with it, say for a month or two. You will find that some things won’t work immediately, because you’re having to adjust to working this way. Other things you will have to fine tune, because some jobs may be done better on other days or at different times. But don’t make too many changes too soon. You will have to give it enough time for you to see a pattern emerging before you can think about the adjustments you might need to make.

Remember, in the long run the only reliable indicators of whether this is working are:

• whether you’re getting your work done on time;

• whether you’re getting better grades;

• whether you are able to use more of your own ideas and your abilities;

• and whether you’re less stressed about your work.

**The main points**

1. Match those periods when you work best with those tasks that call for the highest levels of concentration.

2. Plan your relaxation as much as your work and make sure it marks a clear contrast with it.

3. Be as specific as you can about both.

4. Plot each stage of essay writing on your timetable so you have a regular routine pattern of study.

5. Give yourself enough time between study sessions to allow you to process the ideas so that you are in control of them when you come to use them.

**Conclusion**

Reorganising your pattern of study in this way can noticeably improve your work within a short time. The most immediate impact will be on your ability to process ideas actively and to access your own ideas, rather than simply reproducing those you find in your sources. With a more sophisticated retrieval system you will find you have at your fingertips a wealth of interesting material for your essays. This and a well-organised timetable will give you more opportunity to develop those abilities that your syllabuses set out to assess.