



MANAGING YOURSELF AND MANAGING YOUR TIME

Planning: setting goals and prioritising

▣ DCU Student Learning Resource Portal

Office of the Vice-President for Learning Innovation and Registrar

[Compiled by Ann Coughlan, 2007]

Introduction: understanding why planning is important

In university you need to be able to work without supervision. This includes being able to stand back, review an activity or task, and systematically plan the next steps required. On occasion you may have a number of competing assignment deadlines as well as other commitments. You therefore also need to be able to prioritise. However, before you can set goals or objectives you need to arrive at a clear understanding of where you are now and where you want to go. This means being crystal clear about what is expected of you and what you want to achieve in a particular task or activity. There are many ways to plan and manage your activities and tasks and in time you will develop a system that works best for you. Maybe you already have a system in place but you feel that it could be improved upon.

In this unit you will learn planning strategies in relation to goal setting and prioritising so that you can better meet the varied demands of university life. Being able to set goals, prioritise and meet deadlines for yourself can be linked with the broader skills set which many employers look for as part of project management. [Project management can be defined as the ability to plan, monitor and evaluate using project management tools and techniques to provide workable solutions].

It is important to point out that the guidelines provided in this unit are introductory and generic (in so far as that is possible!). You need to be aware of discipline-specific conventions in this regard. It may be that there are preferred ways of planning in relation to goal-setting and prioritising in particular subject area contexts. All learning skills should ideally be developed within the particular parameters of your discipline(s). As you engage in the university learning experience you will progressively develop knowledge of subject-specific discourse, and through participating in it come to understand its particular conventions. In the meantime, if in doubt, check with your School/Faculty.

Learning objectives

At the end of this unit you will be able to:

- understand why planning in relation to goal setting and prioritising is important;
- set both long-term and short-term goals;
- use strategies to ensure that your goals and objectives are effective,

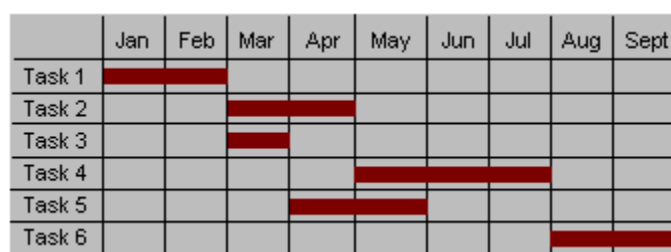
- derive a task-breakdown structure from your short-term goals,
- prioritise your tasks and activities,
- establish the particular conventions in relation to goal setting and prioritising specific to your subject area.

Do you sometimes feel that there is no focus to your study-time or that it lacks structure? Do you often feel as though you are playing catch-up and struggling to meet deadlines? Do you generally feel snowed-under and not in control of your study and time?

If you have answered ‘yes’ to some or all of these questions this unit is for you! When there’s a plan, there’s a chance! Planning frees you from the need to constantly make decisions. Just as you have to plan an essay, you also need to plan your study life.

Planning: Long-term goals

Goals can be long-term or short term. Because the best planning works from the future to the present it is a good idea to start with a general, long-term plan e.g. a calendar year plan, an academic year plan, or a semester plan. You can use a tool from project management called the Gantt Chart, as pictured below, for this purpose.



Gantt Charts – named after their founder Henry Gantt – are simple to understand and easy to change. You could also include major commitments outside of study-time and you will be able to see problem areas at a glance e.g. a month where three or four tasks/activities/commitments overlap. The Gantt Chart will alert you to the need to plan for these eventualities.

Planning: Short-term goals

Gantt charts only provide a vague description of how the whole year/semester fits together. In order to facilitate effective planning we need to set clear short-term goals by breaking down the tasks in the Gantt Chart. Generally, study goals are short-term goals. Your plan will have to be flexible in order to incorporate new activities e.g. assignments, as they arise. However, you will usually have a broad idea of what is expected of you from course material, lecturers and tutors.

Strategies for goal setting

There are a number of strategies you can adopt to ensure that your goals are effective. ‘SMART’ is an anagram for a useful framework for setting goals. The letters stand for:

- S** specific
- M** measurable
- A** achievable
- R** resourced
- T** time-bound

Specific

The more specific and concrete the goal, the more likely it will be achieved. Use action verbs in your goal statements and define them precisely. So, instead of telling yourself: ‘I’ll do some statistics tonight’, try, ‘I’ll complete three problems on page 50 of my statistics book tonight between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m’. It is easy to put off something that is vague.

Measurable

You need to keep track of your progress by monitoring and evaluating so that you will know whether you are achieving your goals or not. A measurable objective sounds something like this: ‘I want my grade in the end-of-semester English assignment to be above the average of my last two English assignments by at least 10 marks’. Whereas a non-measurable assignment sounds like this: ‘I want to do well in English’.

Achievable

It is important that your goals are achievable. Therefore they should be realistic and manageable. In time you will come to know the pace that best suits the way that you work. If you set unachievable goals you risk a drop in your motivation and you set yourself up for failure. While goals should not be too difficult, neither should they be too easy because you will not value the effort if there's no challenge.

Resourced

In order to achieve your goals you need the correct resources. There is not much point in going to study without the study materials needed. Therefore, you must include resource-planning in your action plan.

Time-bound

You will need to set realistic time frames for your work. It is often best to work back from a deadline when you are planning. The next unit, '**Organising and managing your time**', will look at scheduling and time management in more detail.

Finally, write down your goals: this adds gravity to them and means that you will be less likely to forget them.

In terms of your own course of study can you write three SMART objectives?

Planning: Task breakdown structure

When you have identified a set of clear objectives you can then begin to break down each task into manageable chunks. So, for example, say one of your objectives reads:

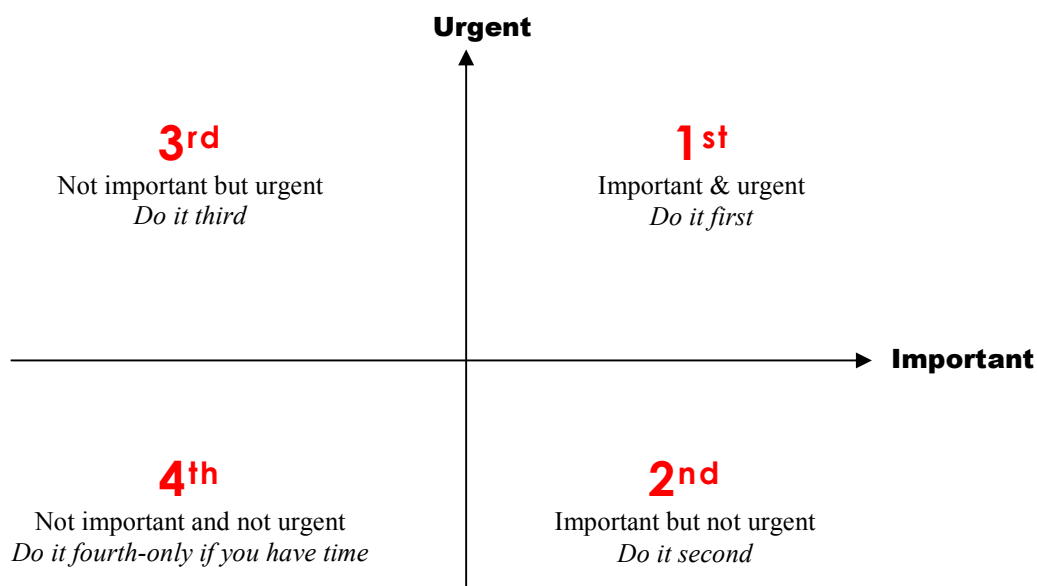
'By Friday, 26th October I will have finished reading the play 'Peer Gynt'. If there are 100 pages in the play and Friday 26th is 10 study days away, you need to aim to read 10 pages per day.'

A task breakdown structure is essentially a ‘to do’ list of all the tasks that need to be done in order to complete the activity/project at hand.

Based on the three objectives you wrote earlier, can you now derive a task breakdown structure from them in the form of a ‘to-do’ list?

Planning: Prioritising

There are times when you will have multiple overlapping goals and when it looks as if there will not be enough time to complete everything on your ‘to do’ list. In this situation you will need to prioritise tasks based on *both* their urgency and their importance. It is critical to include both criteria here: you don’t want to end up doing all the urgent tasks and end up with no time for the important ones. Remember it is not the quantity of what you do, but the quality and value of it that is important. You could prioritise using the system hereunder.



You could also have four trays, one allocated to each of 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th as above. Remember that if you do not have enough time, forget about the 4th quadrant entirely. One thing you can be sure of is that there will be lots of things you could do at university. You will probably find it helpful to use this priority graph to help you to work out what tasks and activities are most important each week. You could also prioritise in terms of the difficulty of the tasks. So, for

example, it might be a good idea to get into the habit of beginning each study session with the subject or task you find most difficult.

Summary

In summary, this unit outlined the importance of setting both long-term and short-term goals. Ways of ensuring that these goals and objectives are effective were explored. Short-term goals in turn can be broken down into more manageable tasks through the development of a 'to do' list. Finally, the issue of prioritising tasks and activities was addressed. The next step is to schedule these tasks and this will be addressed in the unit, '**Organising and managing your time**'.

Setting goals and prioritising is an essential aspect to planning, itself an important skill for an independent, self-managed student.

END OF UNIT: ACTION

Gather as much information as you can in relation to your commitments for this academic year and create a Gantt Chart. Next, create a plan for the current semester by writing a set of clear goals. (Make sure these are SMART goals!). Break down these goals into clear, manageable, discrete tasks and create a to-do list for the coming week. Order your list by prioritising. It is important that you work through the next unit '**Organising and managing your time**' as soon as possible.