



Maximising your productivity

Establishing a routine

If you were to survey successful and productive people from all fields and industries you would see that different approaches work for different people. Author Sylvia Plath preferred to wake at 4.00am, whereas Leo Tolstoy preferred a 9.00am start. Former American President Barack Obama prefers to exercise first thing in the morning, whereas the late American information technology entrepreneur and inventor, Steve Jobs, focused on setting the day's top priority. Setting up a routine, from wake up to wind down, allows you to get into habits that will soon become automatic.

Augmenting a routine

Sometimes we already have a routine and want to transform it into a better or more efficient way of doing things (see [Charles Duhigg's flowchart on how to change a habit](#)). For example, instead of checking emails every time you get an alert, take only a 15 minute period each day to check and respond to emails (find out [why checking email constantly is bad for your productivity](#); video, 1:57). Be smart and use the delete, respond, or file actions when you [manage your emails](#) in the first instance.

When composing email, keep in mind [the five sentence email approach](#).

For example, you could ensure that you cover the following points for your reader:

- Who am I?
- What do I want?
- Why am I asking you?
- Why should you do what I'm asking?
- What is the next step?

For more email tips, see [Asking questions: Communicating with staff](#).

Staying on task

Completing each small task on your to-do list requires focus, clarity, and commitment. You can easily achieve this when you plan your day:

- identify the most important actions
- create a picture of you completing the task
- cut out activities that are not important
- set a reasonable reward

Mapping out the day

Every day has different personal commitments that affect the time available for study. Take five minutes the night before or early in the morning to plan your day. Do you want to get up an hour early to calm your mind and to slowly ease into the day with a big nutritious breakfast? Or do you want to do your workout first to energise you for the whole day?

Rather than declare 'I have six hours so I'm going to work on my major essay assignment', break the time up into smaller chunks. For example, have you ever had someone tell you 'work smarter, not harder'?

Some productivity writers assert the human brain can focus for a maximum 90-120 minutes before it needs to take a break. For example, see this online article titled 'For real productivity, less is truly more'). The article suggests that people should plan their work for the day based on the natural ultradian rhythm, i.e. cycles of 90 minutes followed by 20 minute breaks.

Alternatively, the Pomodoro Technique works in 25 minute periods (a.k.a. a 'pomodoro'). How many pomodoros would it take to complete your first draft of an essay?

No matter the approach you take, what is important is that you monitor the times of the day at which you feel energised, with a clear and focused mind, and use those to your advantage.

Prioritise

Making a list of all the tasks you need to complete can quickly get out of hand if you do not apply some boundaries. There are lots of apps to assist you to compile and access your list, from Wunderlist to Evernote, and even the Tasks feature in Office 365. If you're old school and like a low-budget approach, you can use Post-Its and the Personal Kanban system:

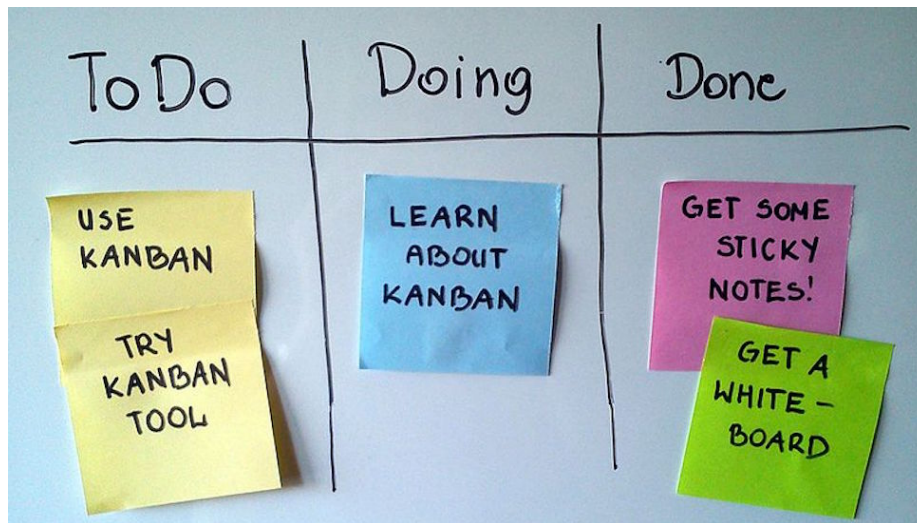


Figure 1. 'Jeff.Iasovski' .(2011). *Simple Kanban board*. Retrieved from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Simple-kanban-board-.jpg> [Licenced under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license]

To be productive on any given day, you need to consult your lists and decide which sub-tasks from your big goals you can complete today given the time available. To further cull your list, try to identify errands that other people can do (e.g. get your partner to pick up the groceries on their way home, ask your roommate to call the landlord about the air-con, etc.). This whole review and decision making process is most commonly done the night before, when you are planning your day.

Expel distractions and say 'no'

Any number of things can distract us from the work we need, have or want to do: from personal commitments, to interest in anything but study, to physical and mental fatigue. It can be difficult to overcome this in the moment if you are not prepared.

There are actions you can take to address your intrinsic (internal) distractions, such as boredom, anxiety, disinterest with a task; and extrinsic (external) distractions, such as colleagues, family or friends disturbing your work space. Once you've identified potential distractions, you can pre-plan ways to maintain control of your study environment.



Activity: Triggers and interruptions

1. Think about the triggers that cause you to stop or delay your work. What is the cause of this trigger? What possible solutions can you propose?

Example

Trigger	Cause	Possible Solutions
The appeal of checking my Facebook or Twitter feeds	Anxiety about task / indecision / unsure about how to do it	Talk about it with a classmate / tutor Set it (the hardest task) as the first thing on my to-do list Remove the temptation – switch phone and tablet off, put them in another room / in bag Schedule time to check social media at the beginning and end of work, not during Put headphones on, listen to study / focus music, free write about it for 90 mins

2. Do the same for interruptions caused by colleagues, neighbours, friends, pets and family.

Example

Interruption	Cause	Possible Solutions
Sound of TV travelling into the study, disturbing my train of thought	Roommate / family	Ask roommate / family to turn the sound down Close the study door Wear headphones Note: Say 'no' when they ask you to join them

Rewards

The act of treating yourself to recognise the completion of a task, whether small or big, does not work for everyone. Some people focus on the reward so that it completely distracts them from doing anything on the task (see [YouTube: The Marshmallow Test](#) (video, 3:27) and [TED Talk: The Discipline of Finishing](#) (video, 3:30)). Others are able to put the reward out of mind until they have officially checked off their list. So be careful if you want to use rewards as part of your motivation strategy.

Perhaps a better way to approach rewards is to see them as part of the process of working or working-in-progress – a part of life. Equally so, you could view it as self-care, to renew and re-energise you mentally, emotionally, and physically as well as personally, professionally, and intellectually. It also doesn't have to be extravagant. Remember, 'the making is in the doing' and 'consistency is key'. By showing up and giving it your best effort on any given day you are working, contributing, and making progress. If you put off the fun, the 'me time', the rest, the reward, you are only derailing your productivity in the long-run. What are you currently doing to take care of yourself?



Activity: Personal rituals

1. What are your daily personal rituals? What is your weekly treat?

Example

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Daily (options)	Reading my book	Reading my book	Reading my book	Reading my book	Reading my book	Dancing and singing to music	Gentle yoga
Weekly (options)		Mid-week early dinner with friend	Hump day T&C (tea and chocolate or cupcake)	Switch off devices for the day	Play on the swings at the park	Brunch with friends	Early morning family long walk

2. What are your semester milestone markers? What do you do to mark them and your efforts?

Example

Milestone	Reward
First Assessment	Coffee and ping pong with classmates at the Bar Cafe
Week 8	Volunteer work with friends
Week 13	Fancy cafe breakfast for one
Last Exam	Field trip to park for picnic and games with family

Manipulating the mind-body connection

Stress on the human body, whether it be psychological, physical, or biochemical, can be beneficial (eustress) or not (distress). The feeling you get from another person smiling at you, the endorphins from exercise, or oxytocin from patting your pet, all demonstrate the powerful connection between body and mind. To ensure long-term success in your studies and beyond, you should start to incorporate healthy mind, healthy body practices.

Move your body

Researchers are beginning to show that **sitting is the new smoking** (video, 3:02). More than four hours per day dramatically increases your risk of dying earlier. Every hour of TV you watch cuts 22 minutes from your life. This is because the act of sitting requires almost no energy, and very quickly slows your circulation and calorie burning.

When you conjure a picture of studying in your head it is almost always of you sitting at a desk. There are three important things you can do to ensure your longevity and productivity:

Movement

The experts recommend taking a short (two minute) walk every hour when you're sitting to do your work (see the **infographic on the health impacts of sitting**). If you can, try a standing desk (custom made or DIY) - sometimes even the kitchen bench or low shelf will do. If you have a long commute on public transport try standing for part of the trip. As the fitness experts always advise, take the stairs instead of the lift and park further away or get off a stop earlier and walk to campus or work. Back in ancient Greece, Aristotle was all about the walking and talking. His students followed him around the Lykeion (a public meeting place) as he taught. This has inspired the recent advent of **walking meetings** (video, 3:28). You might like to try it with your study buddy or study group.

Breaks

By scheduling brief interruptions such as task variation, pause breaks, and coffee/tea breaks in your working day you allow your mind to wander and daydream -- which actually increases your brain activity, and relieves your muscle strain and fatigue. These short breaks are recommended every 20 minutes when you are working in a seated position. You could use apps like [EVO](#) or [PC WorkBreak](#) on your computer, a timer on your phone, or your computer clock regular alerts to remind you throughout the day.

Mental breaks include working on something else, chatting with a friend, making a cup of tea, doing a short meditation (try [Smiling Mind's free app](#)) or looking at cute baby animal pictures (scientifically proven to improve performance; see [Nittono, Fukushima, Yano, & Moriya, 2012](#)).

Eye breaks include looking out into the distance and blinking. Body breaks include anything that gets you moving, from gentle stretches to walking, running, push-ups, star jumps, and dancing. The University has made [neck, shoulder, arm, back, and leg stretch tutorials](#) (video, 7:08) that you can use in your daily study practice. SafeWork NSW also provides [instructions on at-desk stretching](#).

To put the mind-body connection in perspective, you can improve your brain function and boost your exam performance by doing 20 minutes of exercise before you start the exam (see [Hillman et al, 2009 looking at exercise and academic performance in preadolescents](#)). Some say exercise is the brain's fertiliser.

Rest

Getting a good night's sleep is paramount to restoring and re-energising your mind and body. Watch [The Science of Sleep](#) (video, 2:59) to find out more. During REM sleep the mind is active to restore the body and brain, repair cell damage, and help with digestion and memory. Sleep deprivation impacts on your capacity to pay attention, concentrate, learn efficiently, focus your actions at work and on the road, and metabolise energy.

If you feel tired and lethargic it might be wise to speak to your GP or a counsellor ([Western's Counselling Service](#)) or see if a power nap works for you. Power naps are tricky to master. According to the latest research (see [Sara Mednick's TED Talk on sleep](#); video, 17:44), you need to keep it short (around 20 minutes) to improve your alertness, or have a long nap (around 90 minutes) to stimulate creativity and emotional and procedural memory. If you fall somewhere in between (around 60 minutes), however, you'll be rewarded with improved memory but also sleep inertia (grogginess). If you want to try this out, you can use the [sleep pods](#) available in every Western Sydney University campus Library.



Activity: Increasing physical activity

What could you do throughout the day to increase your physical activity? When do you plan to take breaks?

Example

TIME	MOVEMENT	BREAKS		
		Mental	Eye	Body
6am		Morning meditation		Morning exercise
7am				
8am	Remain standing on bus and train or Get off one bus stop before uni			
9am	Take the stairs up to the classroom			
10am	Take a quick walk around the lecture theatre during the half-way break			Shoulder and back stretches
11am	Set my laptop up on a bookshelf in the Library while I work standing for 20-30minutes	Tea break		
12pm	Take a short walk around campus with friends after we finish lunch			
1pm				
2pm	Organise a walking-and-talking study group with classmates using flashcard Q&As			
3pm-5pm	Do at least 10 push-ups and 50 jumping jacks every 30 minutes during 3 hour study time session	Short break – cute baby animals image search	Looking at trees/ dusk skyline Blinking	Neck and shoulder stretches
6pm	Remain standing on bus and train Or Get off one bus stop before home			
7pm	Walk the dog after dinner			
8pm				Evening stretches
9pm				

References

- Hillman, C. H., Pontifex, M. B., Raine, L. B., Castelli, D. M., Hall, E. E., & Kramer, A. F. (2009). The effect of acute treadmill walking on cognitive control and academic achievement in preadolescent children. *Neuroscience*, *159*(3), 1044-54. doi: 10.1016/j.neuroscience.2009.01.057
- Nittono, H., Fukushima, M., Yano, A., & Moriya, H. (2012). The power of *kawaii*: viewing cute images promotes a careful behaviour and narrows attentional focus. *PLoS ONE*, *7*(9): e46362. Doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0046362