

Managing Time Management

by Kayla Yurco

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Among all the uncertainties of higher education today, I find comfort in one strange constant: how we talk about time. Inevitably, each semester, it seems we hit a point where hallway small talk is filled with a mix of something like “how is it November already?!” and “how are there still six weeks left?!” The calendar creeps along at the same pace every year, but we seem to have a funny way of maintaining surprise [at its gait](#) nonetheless. Amidst all this, it seemed a good time to write about how faculty manage our time—and how our teaching can help students learn time management, too.

For me, despite my understanding of the plethora of research suggesting that [time management is about more than life hacks](#), this is the same part of the semester where I find myself trying anything and everything to add extra minutes to my day. In general, I’m [a list person](#) who has dabbled in all kinds of productivity tools ([Todoist](#) is my reigning favorite). I use a [Kanban board](#) for big research projects—the old-fashioned tangible kind with post-it notes I can move around. For teaching, I make a new online (and free) [Trello board](#) for each course every semester to prep and update class topics, readings, and assignments to fit the new schedule. For bouts of writing or grading, [the Pomodoro technique](#) helps me re-correct the non-ergonomic, hunched-over-the-laptop position I inevitably find myself in every 20 minutes (anyone else sitting up a little straighter right now?). I’ll pause here to assure you that my appreciation for productivity tools does not mean I have it all together: the number of tabs open on my browser at any one time is concerning ([OneTab](#) is amazing, but also terrible, for perpetuating this habit), and I have largely accepted that I will never reach the elusive [inbox zero](#) (but if you do, please teach me your ways).

These tools help me stay accountable and productive—or at least, they make me *feel* productive, especially as the semester seems to pick up its pace. But, disappointingly and unsurprisingly, they don’t actually add time back to my day. In early 2022, after a particularly challenging, packed semester, I found myself seeking more balance (I’m a slow study on [saying ‘no’](#), but that’s for another day). Really, I was seeking more insight not only on how I use time but also on *my relationship with* my use of time. Rather than just scheduling my to-dos and time blocking, I decided to formally track my time as it was spent. The [irony](#) that I spent significant time exploring the dizzying array of [digital time-tracking options](#) is not lost on me, but I eventually settled on [Clockify](#) (it’s free, easy to get started, syncs across devices, and there aren’t too many distracting bells and whistles).

What I have now is nearly a year of data on how I actually use my time, not how I think I use my time. I’ll spare you the stats reports, but what was most surprising to me was that some of the tasks that *feel* like they take forever really, truly, don’t. This is why I love mixed methods: the qualitative data about my experiences are just as, or more, telling than the numbers. Grading doesn’t really take any more time if I start at 9pm, but, since I’m not a night owl, it sure feels like it does. Writing only manifests in actual countable words if it happens in the morning, immediately after coffee. Email takes an unsettling amount of time no matter what time of day I deal with it. (That topic, too, is probably for another day, but [this New Yorker article](#) is a good place to start the conversation.)

The idea of a [time diary](#) is not new. But my data helped me see [beyond time management](#) as yet another thing I should simply skill up on. Instead, it made me reconsider the expectations I put on my time and the presumptions I make about how I spend it. Early this semester, it also motivated me to reflect on the expectations I place on students' time in my courses. Students today, like faculty and staff, are managing incredibly complex schedules—especially with so many transitions over the past few years. It seemed a good time to reevaluate necessary time involved (required? intended? [assumed](#)?) for my course assignments and activities.

In searching for resources on this topic, I learned that there are plenty of available [tips for students](#) to learn to manage their workloads (including through [JMU's Learning Strategies Instruction](#)). But less so for faculty who regularly face [uncertainty in how much to assign to students](#). There are some interesting [workload estimators](#) that can help us get started, but it can be difficult to learn how to plan the time required for students to complete academic tasks. The rise of hybrid and online learning options has made counting the notion of "[class time](#)" even more ambiguous.

One easy way to begin the evaluation, though, is to simply ask our students. Anonymous [polls](#) and questions as part of broader [feedback](#) can help us gather preliminary data during the semester about average time spent on assignments, ranges of time spent completing readings, and—in thinking back to my own time diary of sorts—the assumptions students make about time required to complete tasks. For example, for first-time assignments, I've started asking: "if you were to complete a similar assignment again, do you think it would take you more, less, or the same amount of time, and why?" This helps gauge whether high average-to-completion times might have more to do with, say, collective exhaustion around midterms than the design of the assignment itself. In following up on students' responses, I make space for small group discussion in class about what work (aka time-use) habits are working well for students. I offer ways I've organized my own work habits, and I introduce some of the productivity tools I shared above (with [necessary caveats](#)). And, [like others](#), I've suggested students experiment with their own time diaries.

The importance of [scaffolding instructional content](#) is well understood. But what would it look like to scaffold the management of *time management* into our courses? Easy wins are making space for explaining the [rubrics](#) we use and iteratively returning to them for repeat or low-stakes assignments. We can later level up on this by asking students to [self-assess](#) using those rubrics *and* against the time they expected certain activities to take (perhaps based on the average time-to-completion data we collect as regular feedback). We can consistently check in about how to [prioritize](#) medium- and long-term projects in our courses, especially if we have [flexible assignments](#) built into our curriculum. We can talk about what to do [when we get stuck](#). And we can model different types of study habits directly in our courses with, for example, one quick review question at the start or end of every class meeting to demonstrate the importance of distributing [the study cycle](#).

As it turns out, talking to students about the art and science of time management can help with more than checking off to-dos. It makes visible the [hidden curriculum](#) of succeeding in college, especially for first-generation students (by the way, CFI is offering [more programming](#) on this soon). It encourages faculty to check assumptions that students just know what to do outside of class or that all students approach tasks in the same way—norms that perpetuate [barriers](#) to higher education for historically excluded groups and for learners with significant [caretaking responsibilities](#). And it underscores the necessity of embracing [universal design for learning](#), especially in terms of [teaching neurodiverse students](#) who can [broaden social perspectives on time management](#). Indeed, all learners benefit from

discussions about [support planning and strategy development](#) for the hows and whys of getting things done.

While working on managing my time management has surely kept me a little busier this last year, it really doesn't feel like one more thing on my to-do list. It might not help me add minutes to my day (or [weeks to my life](#)), but it is helping me [rethink my relationship with the clock](#) for all the other things I like to do. Even better if I can help students do the same.

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