Time Management Tip Sheet – By Students, For Students
By Katie Allison and Eric van Velzen

Concept 1: Goal Setting

Engage in realistic goal setting so you can challenge yourself without disappointing yourself.

Question:
Do you ever feel exhausted trying to meet goals that seem out of reach?

Tips / Response:

● Challenging yourself is good for growth, but being challenged to do something out of your current ability may lead to stress or distress. This is why careful “goal” setting is important. The “goals” we mean here can be anything from the deadlines you set for yourself with practice problems, or the amount of time you give yourself to master topics before an exam. Reflecting back on what goals you were able to meet, and what goals allocated too little time and effort will allow you to plan more realistically, and be less stressed.

● You’ll know that your goals are being set realistically when you can meet the majority (but not all) of your goals on an average week. The goals that escape you provide motivation to push forward, and the ones that you meet allow you to verify your expectations.

● Take time to be aware and understand your ability, and be patient with yourself in how fast that ability will improve. Your current ability may only be at the point where you can just pass your courses, or only let you get up to a certain grade. Demanding better performance from yourself when you are at your current limit will leaving you feeling insufficient. Try to focus on improving your ability to meet your goals, but be realistic about how long it will take and how much personal growth is needed to get there. That kind of growth may take you one or several semesters, or even 2 years and that’s okay. It’s part of the process of learning how to learn, and learning to perform well in an academic environment.

● Ideally, you want to learn your limits and capabilities over time and get to a point where you set incremental goals. Growth happens slowly, and your goals should get steadily more ambitious to reflect your actual learning pace, rather than growing in leaps and bounds.

● Avoid setting goals that only work in a perfect world. Some things will take longer than you expect, or you might get sick, need to make food, etc--plan your study goals with a small amount of slack time for life’s inevitable imperfections.
Concept 2: Strategic Studying

Make a study plan so you are directing your time and energy on assignments that are worth the most marks for time spent

Question:

Do you spend so much time doing homework that you are not able to find time to study material for your actual tests and midterms?

Tips / Response:

● *Don’t let homework get in the way of your learning!* Your brain needs time to process material after exposure to a new concept. Reading or rereading the textbook or lecture slides, discussing the material with a friend, or even just sitting and thinking about it can be as helpful or more helpful than going through problem after problem.

● Some courses will offer you a huge set of practice questions and exams you are recommended to do in order to succeed on quizzes and tests. Sometimes this can be misleading and seem to suggest that you should just do every question to succeed. Exhaustively doing questions may not be the best way to learn the material or prepare for the test. Sometimes you only need to do a few questions to confirm if you understand the concepts, or to test yourself and see where you are lacking. *Be smart about how you use these practice materials* so you learn as much as possible without excess work.

● In many cases, working for quality is better than working for completeness. For other assignments, you may get more marks for having a full solution that doesn’t work than you would for having a functional step of the solution. *Read in between the lines and adapt* to each case.

● As per the Pareto principle: *80% of the content comes from 20% of your effort*, and the last 20% of the content will consume the other 80% of your effort. To study strategically, focus on the key inputs that create the most effective results (the key principle, the “analysis” section of a lab, etc.). It’s not often productive to push to get 100% of every assignment done--the perfecting touch often takes more effort than it’s actually worth.

● Often, it’s helpful to *rank items by priority* when making a to-do list. You will often have more work than time to do it, so it’s important to differentiate high-priority/necessity items from medium-priority/important items from low-priority/additional items. Make sure that you have enough time to finish all your high-priority items on a given day, then try to complete as many medium-priority items as possible. If you have extra time, try the low-priority items, but don’t worry too much about them. Ranking your to-do lists can make the sheer volume of things to do less intimidating.
Concept 3: Diminishing Returns When Studying

There is a point in which more hours spent studying will not equal greater marks, and in fact may reduce marks.

**Question:**

How much of your study time is actual focused studying and how much is getting ready to study, or sitting at your desk but not concentrating?

**Tips / Response:**

- A common rule of thumb that many engineering students follow is: if you are stuck on a problem set question for a long time compared to the rest, move on to other problems and seek help. This helps you stay on track, not get discouraged, and still keep solving questions quickly. Sometimes the solutions to problems may come to you while you are passively thinking about them, or maybe you see something when going through your notes that explains it. In any case, *don’t just sit stuck on a question for a long time.*
- It may go against everything you have come to learn before, but *sometimes it’s best to just submit partially complete assignments.* Doing 30% of an assignment to get 60% of the marks when you don’t have time to do anymore is just fine. Submitting a partially complete assignment, or submitting an assignment late with a penalty is probably preferred to losing a lot of sleep, or falling behind in other courses. Just remember that this is a tool you can employ when you need it.
- *It’s more effective to study when you’re motivated to do so.* It’s often a waste of time to try to force yourself to study when you’re tired, unfocused, or restless. It’s better to spend an hour going for a walk and then 2 hours studying than it is to “study” for 3 hours but not really focus or get work done. A shorter study period with motivation is more
effective than a longer period of disinterest. Sometimes you just have to push through lack of motivation, but always think about whether there’s some way that you can get yourself to focus and get motivated.

Concept 4: Keep perspective on what is important to you

What you do outside of studying can actually help you study better and improve your grades

Question:

What do you do beside studying to make sure you are taking care of your well-being?

Tips / Response:

- The four (or more) years of your degree are a marathon, not a sprint. You might make it through first year practicing unhealthy habits, but it will catch up with you in upper years. *Being sleep-deprived, hungry, overwhelmed, or bored will affect the quality of your work.* It’s not just good for your health to practise self care—it’s an investment in your future work.

- For physical priorities: you should be sleeping enough each night (and no, four hours is not enough!), eating enough food and making sure you’re eating healthy where you can, staying hydrated (coffee doesn’t count), and engaging in some kind of exercise, whether that’s working out at a gym or playing Quidditch or doing yoga. *Take care of your body* to improve your long-term focus, mood, and motivation.

- For mental/emotional priorities: *studying and doing well in school are important but not always sufficient* for fulfillment. It’s important to do things that make you feel satisfied and make your time meaningful. Allocate some of your time to volunteering, joining a team or club, taking on an engineering project to apply your studies, or anything else that makes you happy. It’s also important to have some off time to recharge and refresh your mind. Reading or watching Netflix or taking a nap can be valuable if you’re feeling overwhelmed.

- Everyone has a breaking point, but you don’t want to work until you find it. Practise self-care on a maintenance basis, not an emergency basis—life is better and easier to manage if you feel happy and healthy!

- *Recognize that you will have to make sacrifices,* because you don’t have time for everything. If you sat down and filled up your calendar with classes and study slots, you could easily fill up every spare minute with studying. Rather than doing this, make a list of things that you want to make time for—personal, academic, and professional factors. Then decide the *minimum* amount of time that you want to spend on each activity. Fit the personal and other factors in first, then fill up the rest with study time (and leave some free time!) If you find that there’s not enough time for studying, make sacrifices in other areas—but don’t sacrifice everything else in your life for school. Be proactive about making time in your life to actually have a life.
Concept 5: Engage in self-reflection

Get to know yourself and who you are as a learner

Question:

Do you make time to self-reflect on your goals, your future planning, what matters to you the most?

Tips / Response:

● In the long term, the knowledge you gain from your time at U of T may fade, and you’ll probably gain a much different set of more specialized knowledge in the workplace. The part of your education that matters the most and helps you the longest is the learning skills that you develop. Many engineering jobs require lifelong learning, so it’s important to take time during university to really figure out how you absorb and understand material. University is a rare chance to not only learn, but also to easily test out and reflect on your learning strategies—don’t waste that chance! Set goals, try new things, then look back and see how you can adapt your strategy and become a better learner.

● Tests provide you with a nice, neat, quantitative measure of how well certain strategies work as compared to others. For instance, you could focus on practice problems for one quiz and then, if that doesn’t work well, try doing textbook readings before the next quiz and see if you understand the material and do better. Always stick with what works, but don’t repeat methods that aren’t working for you. Learning strategies, like many other designs, are a process of iterative improvement.

● Some good times for scheduled self-reflection are: at the start of the term, after the first full week of classes, around midterm time, before exams, and after exams.

● If you’re in first year, recognize that high school studying is a different experience from university studying—you’ll need lots of time in your first year to reflect on what you’re doing, because you’ll essentially need to start from scratch. It will take time, so don’t expect yourself to be great at studying and assignments and exams right away.

● Take the initiative and use your resources! There are tons of great time management tools and strategies out there that we won’t have time to discuss in this session. To-do list apps, online calendars, boards like Trello, and other tools can do a lot of the management for you, and take some of the stress away. Use technology to your advantage—a little planning and some app setup can prepare you for smooth sailing for the rest of the term.

● You may not know what you want to do after university, and that’s okay! This is a great time to explore different clubs and teams, research topics that interest you, and generally explore new things. This should also be a part of your self-reflection—where do you want your learning journey to lead?
Concept 6: Study alone together time

Know when you need to be around other people and when you need to study alone to keep yourself motivated.

Question:

How do you study best? What keeps you motivated to study?

Tips / Response:

- Both studying alone and studying in groups have value, but each has their own time and place. There’s no set rule for how much time you should spend in groups versus alone, so try both out to see what works best. To find people to study with, try your common room or invite people from your class to go to a library with you.
- In many cases, studying in groups is both more enjoyable and more efficient than studying solo! Friends and classmates can help provide a new perspective on challenging concepts, bounce ideas with you, or help to verify your approach and results for problem sets and labs.
- When there’s no immediate deadline, it can be worthwhile to study with friends even if it means you’re a little less productive in the moment. Over time, feeling lonely and feeling like you’re missing out on good times will both make you unhappy and make it harder for you to focus--so take those enjoyable study group days when you need them!
- Actively check in on yourself and your priorities every so often when working in groups. Are you focusing? Are you getting work done? Are you understanding what you’re doing? If yes, great! If no, think about your priorities. If you have impending deadlines or if you’re feeling behind, it may be time to find a spot to work alone and really buckle down. Remember to consciously check--it’s easy to ignore the loss of productivity if you’re focusing on your friends.
- Beyond focus, there tend to be emotional factors associated with group studying. If you’re feeling like you’re falling behind in classes, studying with may make you feel much better (if they’re similarly behind) or much worse (if they’re on top of their work). Studying with people who are working at a different pace and on a different section of the course may do more harm than good if it causes you to stress or panic. If this is the case, work alone until you’ve caught up, and don’t feel embarrassed about asking your classmates questions about old material. Everyone falls a little behind at some point, but most of the time it’s not too hard to catch up!