# 10 tips to overcome procrastination

Procrastination is one of the most common challenges when it comes to studying and working productively. You may not feel like studying for a while, feel demotivated, become easily distracted, feel tired, or find a certain task difficult. You might also suffer from perfectionism or fear of failure. Perhaps you are a "master procrastinator" and procrastinate with almost all your tasks. If that is the case, you probably could use some advice that will help to permanently change your study behavior. Check out these tips below, which are based on scientific insights from cognitive psychology, neuropsychology, educational sciences and our own research.

1 Break it down: make your goals achievable [1]

Nothing great is created in an instant! Big goals and tasks can feel overwhelming. Break larger tasks into smaller, more manageable chunks.[2] A daily to-do list can be helpful. Be specific, make it actionable and don't overcomplicate things. Set time limits for each task, make a list of 2-3 small tasks to do today, and prioritize. Completing tasks within the time limits you set will keep you to stay motivated and on track. Getting things done – however small they might be – helps to reinforce the idea that things get done.

2 Swiss-cheese it
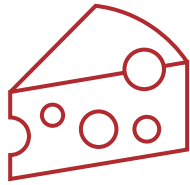
Recognize the significance of momentum.[3] Everything starts with a single step. A variation on tip 1 is devoting short chunks of time to a big task and doing as much as you can in that time with few expectations about what you will get done. For example, try spending about ten minutes just writing down all your ideas that come to your mind on the topic regarding a paper that you need to write. After repeating this several times for a specific task, you will have made some progress, thus gaining some momentum. You will have less work remaining to complete the task, and it won't seem so huge because you've punched holes in it (like Swiss cheese). In short, it'll be easier to complete the task because you've gotten started and removed some of the obstacles that were in the way of reaching your goal. See if ChatGTP can help you on your way.

3 Work hard, relax hard

Once you pick up the work(load) you will hopefully experience a feeling of flow. You will want to continue getting things done. However, to endure, you also need to relax. Studies show that a short run, light exercise or short brisk walk can have a positive effect on your focus, productivity and overall well-being. Movement also builds up your self-confidence to be able to complete (difficult) tasks, ensures less stress and promotes a better night's sleep.

4 Eat the frog [4]

Identify one challenging task (the frog) and complete the task (eating it) first thing in the morning. To put it simply, eating the frog is the process of identifying one (mostly challenging) task of the day and completing it before the end of the morning (before you do any other work). Repeat daily! Eating the frog relieves you from that one difficult task leaving you with a carefree and stress-free afternoon/evening.

## 5 Set your brain to start mode [5]
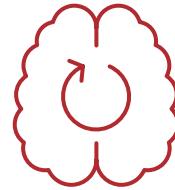
Through rituals you, and your brain, can get activated for a ready-to-start mode, as you condition your brain by telling it 'We'll get to work in a minute'. If you turn this into a ritual that is directly useful for your studies, for example to help achieve tidying up your desk, then you kill two birds with one stone. A ritual can also include organizing your workspace or doing a meditation exercise before getting to work.

## 6 Reward yourself for a job well done [6]
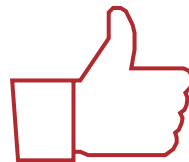
Have you completed a difficult task? Reward yourself! This can help you stay motivated and focused on your goals. This helps to condition yourself in a positive way, which makes it easier to start an assignment next time. You can already feel the pending reward when you start a new task.

7 Strategically manage your energy
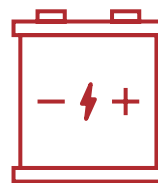
Get enough sleep (+/– 8 hours), eliminate low-value tasks and avoid distractions (e.g. smart phone). When you're feeling most energized, complete the most crucial tasks or activities. Take adequate breaks and drink enough water (>2 liters). Avoid energy drinks and too much coffee or sugar in general. Since they tend to give a temporally boost, but a dip soon after.

8 Avoid multitasking [7]
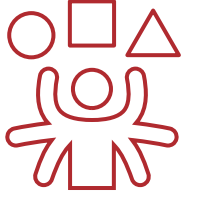
Focusing on a single task allows you to be more productive and produce better results. Many people believe that they can multitask well, but in fact your working memory can really only handle one task at a time. So choose one task to focus on and only start the next one when the first one is finished.

9 Eliminate distractions [8]

This could include turning off your phone, finding a quiet place to work and avoiding distractions. Did you know that every time you look at your phone your work is interrupted and you actively need to restart your brain to get back on task? Many apps are designed to keep you engaged and are created to be addictive. Don't let them dictate your productivity. How? It's a lot easier to withstand any distraction if you can't see and/ or hear it, so put your phone out of sight and out of earshot. If that's not enough, (temporarily) turn off your notifications, remove your most distracting apps, or opt to go completely offline while studying. Research shows that you already experience a positive effect on your productivity after one day without notifications. Wow! What might happen if you would do that for a few days in a row!

10 You're not alone: join forces and share accountability [9, 10]
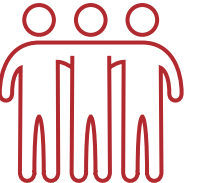
Working together on shared goals helps motivation and changes behavior. See if you can find a study buddy, or opt to meet up with fellow students. A mentor or a teacher can also be helpful to keep you on track in pursuing your goals and become a précrastinator.

Some online courses (free for Inholland students)

– New Heroes: Online training uitstelgedrag leren aanpakken (newheroes.com)
– Caring Universities: Module GetStarted (caring-universities.com)
– New Heroes: Online training timemanagement (newheroes.com)

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1 Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35-year odyssey. American Psychologist, 57(9), 705-717.
2 Gollwitzer, P. M., & Oettingen, G. (2014). The psychology of goal pursuit: How intentions create, inhibit, and direct behavior. In R. F. Baumeister & K. D. Vohs (Eds.), Handbook of self-regulation: Research, theory, and applications (2nd ed., pp. 162-185). New York: Guilford Press.
3 Pychyl, T. A. (2013). Solving the procrastination puzzle: A concise guide to strategies for change. New York: Penguin. Check out this video.
4 Tracy, B. (2008). Eat That Frog: 21 great ways to stop procrastination and get more done in less time. Check out this video.
5 Lectoraat Studiesucces (2021). Ten tips for less distraction and focus (2021). Inholland: Haarlem.
6 O'Donoghue, T., & Rabin, M. (1999). Doing it now or later. American Economic Review, 89(1), 103-124.
7 Lectoraat Studiesucces (2021). Ten tips for less distraction and focus (2021). Inholland: Haarlem.
8 Van der Weijden, T., Dijksterhuis, A., & Meurs, T. (2008). The more choice, the more delay: A meta-analysis of the effect of choice on decision making speed. Journal of Consumer Psychology, 18(3), 259-268.
9 Kappe, F.R. & Mazajchik, T. (2022). Be(come) engaged. Inholland: Haarlem.
10 Klassen, R. M., Krawchuk, L. L., & Rajani, S. (2008). Academic procrastination of undergraduate students: Low self-efficacy to self-regulate predicts higher levels of procrastination. Contemporary Educational Psychology, 33(4), 915-931.

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