

Time Management

Remember that time is finite, with a limit to what can be achieved in a working week! This tip sheet provides:

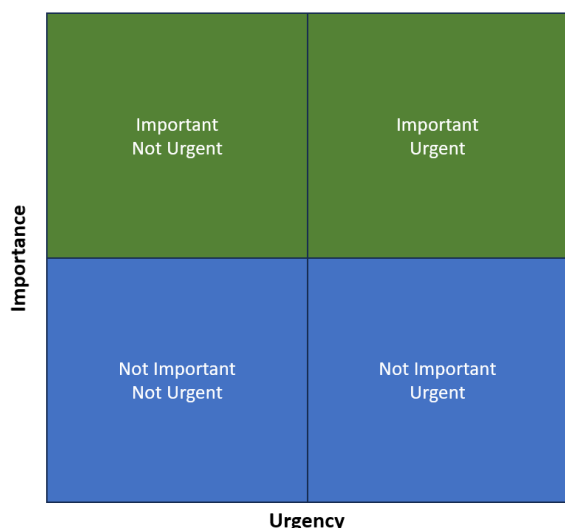
- Suggestions on how best to spend your professional development time.
- Approaches to turning down unwanted tasks.
- Some time management tools.

1. Working out what to do

The first step in effective time management is working out **which tasks to do during your working day**.

Academic roles encompass a wide variety of tasks. Some tasks may align with your values and/or skills so you may be naturally drawn to doing these e.g., participating in EDI initiatives or collecting data. There are also 'high value' tasks i.e., those that take you closer to your career goals. These will be tasks such as grant writing or writing publications.

Choosing where to spend your time is essential. The Eisenhower Matrix looks at two variables when making decisions about what tasks to do. It asks, how urgent and how important is a task? This tip sheet will focus on the important tasks as identifying these is challenging.



2. What are important tasks?

Importance is subjective and depends on what you want to achieve.

Tasks that are important because they align with your personal values might be:

- Conducting research that makes a clear difference to people's lives.
- Using your creativity to design effective teaching material.
- Projects that support certain cohorts of students.
- Taking regular breaks or exercise to maintain [wellbeing](#).

Tasks that are important for advancing your career might be:

- Applying for [funding](#).
- Building new [networks](#) and collaborating.
- Raising your profile internally and externally.

Working out your which tasks are important to you requires time and reflection. It helps if your values are aligned with what is important within your role.

People often focus on what is urgent as they tackle their to-do list. However, it is crucial to define what is important to you from a personal and career perspective. **Decide what is important to you at this stage in your career and stick to these important tasks.**

3. Saying no to unwanted tasks

If you are sticking to your important tasks, you will need to say no to some requests. This is a challenge, particularly for people that like to avoid conflict. It is essential to turn down some requests to protect your mental health and avoid burnout. Prioritise your [mental wellbeing](#).

It is important to be direct and honest when saying no rather than avoiding the situation (being passive) or becoming angry (being aggressive).

Let us say that a group leader has asked you to stay late to finish an extra experiment. You are unable to stay late at such short notice, so you need to say 'no' assertively. Here are five ways to say 'no' that might work, depending on the context.

- **Direct:** No, I can't stay late tonight.
- **Acknowledging:** I understand that you need this data, but I can't stay tonight.
- **Reasoned:** I can't stay tonight as I need to pick up my son from nursery.
- **Rain check:** I can't stay tonight but I can stay late tomorrow.
- **Enquiring:** Is there any other time I can do this extra experiment?

4. Other time management tools and techniques

Avoid procrastination

Most people procrastinate because they are trying to avoid the emotional repercussions of tackling a task.

The thought of doing a task you do not want to do may feel overwhelming. Doing something else instead gets rid of the overwhelming feelings! However, negative feelings, such as guilt, replace feeling overwhelmed. This starts a vicious cycle.

Here are three ways to tackle procrastination:

- Forgive yourself for putting tasks off. Berating yourself solves nothing and continues the vicious cycle.
- Identify one challenging task (the frog) and complete this task first thing in the morning (eat the frog!).
- If you are procrastinating because you do not know how to tackle the task, send an email to someone that might be able to help you and give them a deadline to reply. This can help you over the start line.

Choose where and when to work

Some people work more effectively at certain times of the day. If your work allows it, work at times when you think you are most productive.

Choose a space and environment where you know you can work well. Use headphones, tidy up, lock yourself away.... whatever works for you.

Block out time for tasks in your calendar

Blocking out time in your diary for specific tasks can help some people stay focussed. Many online calendars allow you to use assorted colours when inputting information. This helps to categorise tasks, providing a visual cue for how you are spending your time each day.

If you have important tasks to complete, you can set an out of office response so that people know you are busy at that time.

Group similar tasks together

There are probably some things in your schedule that are unmovable e.g., laboratory meetings. Whenever possible, try to group similar things together to improve efficiency. For example, if you have your laboratory meeting on a Tuesday, can you schedule other meetings on a Tuesday?

Break big tasks down into manageable goals

Break down big tasks into manageable goals to help with any feelings of overwhelm.

[The Pomodoro technique](#) can help people that prefer to work in blocks of time. This approach involves working in blocks of 25 minutes and then taking a break for 5 minutes. This is repeated until you have finished your task or run out of energy!

Create to-do lists

Keep to-do lists, electronically or on paper. Keep one list as things come up and another list for each day with priorities.

Think about what is realistically achievable in a day and cross off the tasks as you go. Reward yourself after you have achieved tasks on your to-do list.

Create accountability

Some people are more productive if they are accountable to someone else. This is often a reason people work more productively in a team particularly if other people are waiting for results.

Think about ways that you can create accountability e.g., ask a helpful colleague to read a first draft of a paper you are writing. Promise to have the first draft of the paper to them by a particular date. Or schedule monthly meetings with your manager where you need to report back on specific tasks.

Use time management applications (Apps)

There are many time management Apps available. Apps like [Rize](#) keeps a log of how you have used your time, helping you to build better habits. Apps like [Forest](#) help you stay focussed and motivated and [Motion](#) uses AI to build your schedule.

5. Finally

Remember that effective time management is subjective and depends on what you want to achieve. Some tools will work for you and others will not. You will have good and bad days.

The key is not to prioritise what is on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities. - Stephen Covey

