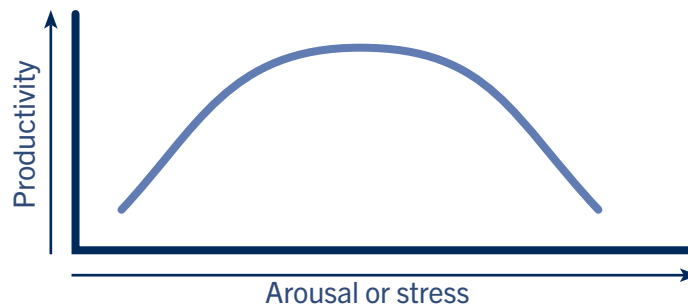


MOTIVATION AND PROCRASTINATION

People don't always mean the same thing when they talk about procrastination. Sometimes, they mean that they are unmotivated to do something they find trivial. Other times, they mean that they're too overwhelmed to do a good enough job on an important project or projects. More than a century ago, psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson found that performance is affected by what most of us call "stress".



To use the Yerkes-Dodson Law, we have to figure out two things: what we need to do to be productive and what we need to do to manage our stress. The following suggestions can be applied to multiple situations, but are grouped in response to different types of work and feelings.

For small, "trivial" tasks:

- **Think long term.** If the task at hand supports your long-term goals (even if only to earn a credit to get your degree), you have a good reason to do this work. Keep this in mind! If it does not support your long-term goals, it's worth considering why you're doing this in the first place. What you're doing right now should relate to your long-term dreams.
- **Use the five-minute strategy.** Make yourself a deal: you'll work on the task for at least five minutes, even if it's only brainstorming and recording your ideas, and then set a timer. More often than not, you'll find the momentum you need to continue.
- **Make it a habit.** If this is a weekly task, plan to do it at a time when you have a reason to finish it quickly. For instance, if you have an hour between classes and want to have more time for other parts of your life, make it part of your weekly schedule. With repetition, it can become a habit to use these small bits of time.

For big tasks:

- **Break them down!** You can't do everything at once, so give yourself some time to make a long-term strategy. The UTSC Assignment Calculator offers a great model for this: instead of trying to finish a big project the weekend or night before a deadline, write out the steps you need to complete the job, estimate the amount of time it takes to do each one, and take care of them one by one.
- **Don't expect yourself to be perfect.** Putting too much pressure on yourself is a frequent cause of procrastination. Allow yourself to experiment, make mistakes and fix them in subsequent steps. A bad first try is still better than not trying at all.
- **Ask for help.** Many students at U of T feel like they "should" know something already—but everyone is here to learn! Professors, TAs, subject-specific aid centres, peers and friends, and learning strategists are just some of the resources out there.

When you feel bored:

- **Take care of yourself.** The medicine wheel teaches us that we are not just intellectual beings: we have physical, emotional and spiritual needs, too¹. Give your body the nutrition, exercise and sleep it needs, and not only because these improve concentration and motivation. Make connections with friends and talk with people. It is not weakness to be vulnerable in expressing yourself. And no matter what your spirituality looks like—whether it is a religion, fulfilment through public service or a private belief system—remember that you are not alone.
- **Set a schedule.** A consistent routine makes doing the things you need and want to do a matter of habit. Find time every day to do something that you enjoy, even while you're studying and working. Take control of your life! When figuring out what your schedule should look like, we recommend thinking about the following factors:
 - external constraints and needs (classes, office hours, jobs, etc.)
 - reasonable expectations for work each day
 - your circadian rhythm (when you sleep, when you're most focused and energized)
 - task switching (e.g., it can be tough to write after repetitive tasks)
 - fatigue (multiple short study sessions can be more effective than a whole day on one topic)
- **Challenge yourself.** We don't grow when we're not trying to do new things. Make a list of all the things you would do if you were living your ideal life and pick one to start doing this week. Try a new sport, make art or crafts or get involved in something that gets you out of bed.

When you feel overwhelmed:

- **Find or create a calm space.** Inner tranquility can be encouraged by the environment you are in. Clutter and other distractions take a toll on you, so spend a bit of time clearing your desk or travelling to a place where you like to study.
- **Take a break or get some sleep.** Our brains process information without conscious thought and sometimes, a break is actually what we need to figure things out.
- **Learn to say “no.”** At times it can be impossible to do everything you'd like to do. Figure out what is most important to you, and accept that some things might have to be done later or not at all.
- **Write everything out.** Instead of worrying about what you have to do, make a detailed list or a calendar of deadlines, and figure out what has to happen. Some of the items on the list might not be within your control. Instead, focus on the things that you can affect and take care of them one small step at a time. We worry because we're trying to keep track of everything in our heads, so make a system or use tools that you can trust instead: calendars, schedules, apps and so on.

Want to know more?

Academic Success has resources, workshops, events and appointments to support you:

→ find us in the [Student Success Centre \(214 College Street, main floor\)](#),

→ look us up online at uoft.me/AcademicSuccess,

→ or give us a call at [416.978.7970](tel:416.978.7970)

¹Bopp, J., et al. (2004). *The Sacred Tree: Reflections on Native American Spirituality*. Lotus Press.

Modified from Hay, I., Bochner, D., Dungey, C., & Perret, N. (2012). “Thinking Through: Critical Thinking,” in *Making the Grade: A Guide to Study and Success* (pp. 57-68). Oxford University Press.