

Mastering Independent Work

Princeton prides itself on its tradition of independent work. Even students who excel at coursework often find themselves confounded by their junior papers and senior theses, mainly because they need to structure and regulate their own work like never before. Below is some advice from those who know for planning and producing independent work that you can be proud of, on schedule and with less stress.

Research and Writing

- **Don't get bogged down in research.** You might be tempted to begin your project by researching as much as possible. You certainly want to be thorough, but you will never be able to read everything on your topic. Instead, limit the scope of your research: start writing early, summarize what you are reading and sketch its relevance to your topic.
- **Search for and examine sources with an end result in mind.** Evidence is only useful if it's evidence for something. Why are you reading a certain piece? Why are you looking for a certain article (need to fill in the background, find an objection, adopt and adapt and theory to further your argument, etc.)? Each source should serve a clear function, and looking for sources with a function in mind can help limit your search and make your time spent in the stacks more productive.
- **Begin writing early.** Though you may be tempted to put off writing until you feel "done" with your research, this mindset lends itself to procrastination. There's always another book or article to read, but gaps or weaknesses in your argument won't likely become apparent until you actually start writing.

Getting Advice

- **If your adviser is somewhat removed or relaxed, be sure to meet or contact him or her regularly on your own.** Advisers often have a very full workload. The amount of attention your work receives is therefore related to the effort you make in actively including your adviser in your work. This approach is particularly crucial if your advisor allows you to determine your own research and writing schedule.
- **If you're stuck, don't just spin your wheels. Take advantage of available help.** If you get stuck, talk to your advisor or other professors. If you are a perfectionist, don't postpone meeting your advisor until you have polished chapters or analyses. If you have a problem—such as difficulty in finding sources—ask for advice. Don't feel ashamed for not finding the papers on your own or that you haven't entirely finished that chapter you promised. The advisors are usually willing to help you with whatever you are stuck; that's what they're there for, after all.
- **Utilize the time spent talking with your advisor wisely.** Your advisor is probably a very busy person. Accordingly, always go to a meeting with him or her knowing what you want to get out of that meeting. Do you need help navigating the literature? Would you like to extend your understanding of certain ideas, concepts, or analyses? Have a clear agenda—e.g., here's what I have done, here is what I need from you and how you can help me—and your advisor will be impressed. Most important, your meeting will be much more efficient and productive for you both.
- **Take advantage of existing expertise on self-regulation.** The McGraw Center has lots of research-based advice on time management and self-regulation, including how to set realizable goals, how to manage your time and attention, and how to assess progress. Consider scheduling a one-on-one meeting with an ACE fellow to help set up a schedule that works for you.

Structuring and regulating your time

- **Break down your large project into more manageable chunks.** A one-hundred-page paper sounds daunting, four twenty-five page papers sound less so. Early on, compile a list of specific tasks you'll need to do for your project, and use that list to build a schedule that makes lots of little successes possible.
- **Find a study place that you can dedicate just to independent work and use it only for that purpose.** Large independent projects lack the external structure provided by most courses. You have to devise your own regularities to keep on track, which is to say that you need to develop new habits just for these projects. Having a particular place where you only work on independent projects encourages new productive habits.
- **Write regularly, every day if possible.** Regular writers produce more and suffer less stress than binge writers (i.e., writers who write only occasionally but in larger blocks). Research on academic productivity strongly suggests that even writing just 30 minutes each day will lead to more and more useful pages than intermittent, larger chunks of writing. Writing regularly also reduces startup costs for each session—you don't have to go back and remind yourself of what you were thinking when you last left off.
- **Team up to stay on track.** Research shows that only precious few people can set personal goals and deadlines and actually stick to them. You'll be much more productive if you set up external stakes and rewards, whether it be a writing partner that you regularly report to, regular meetings with an advisor or graduate student, or regular trips to the Writing Center. Whatever you choose, focus on reinforcing regularity. Teaming up with a friend will also help relieve the stress and sense of isolation that often accompanies independent projects.
- **Watch out for the Internet time sink.** Unless you must do online research, leave your laptop at home. Wasting time browsing the Internet, IMing, etc., proves too easy without any hard and fast deadlines—particularly if you can too easily justify time online as some sort of research.