

Semester Planning and Time Management

You've got goals on all different levels. You probably have some career and life aspirations, some goals about graduating from Princeton, some hopes for your classes this semester, and some idea of what you've got to get done today. If you're working towards all these goals on all these different timescales, does it make sense to use just one planning tool? Does "Start becoming a lawyer" really belong on your daily checklist? We don't think so.

Instead, we developed a suite of tools you can use to help you keep an eye on all your different types of goals and work toward them efficiently.

We think there are three useful levels to consider while planning at Princeton: the semester level, the weekly level, and the daily level. So, we made some tools to help with each of those different levels.

The Semester

We have two items to help you plan for your semester. The first is a one-page semester schedule. This tool has every day of the semester on one simple sheet. Fill it out with all your class projects, papers, tests, and problem sets. Add in your extracurricular events, social commitments, and planned outings. Be sure to include any special trips you'll be taking. Once filled in, this should give you a broad overview of what your semester will be like. Once we had a student do this activity and she found out she had four hard midterms in three days! It certainly affected how she used the few weeks beforehand. You should be able to catch things like that at this level and should give you an idea of when your most difficult weeks will be and maybe suggest some ideas about how you could prepare for those in advance. Post it on your dorm room wall and refer to it often throughout the semester to track your progress.

You can also use the semester calendar to start planning when you're going to start doing things, and other major milestones in the biggest projects you're facing this semester. Try to figure out ways you can make sure you stick to these deadlines, maybe by structuring a rewards system or letting other people (friends, preceptors) know when you'll be done and having them hold you to it.

The second semester-long item is the grading guide. While we were using our semester schedule, we noticed that some weeks we'd have two assignments due, a paper for philosophy and one for architecture, but one of them was weighted 25% of the course grade and the other weighted 5%. So, to give some context to the due dates and other items on the semester calendar, we devised the grading guide so you can see how each item fits into the relevant course.

The Week

There are a lot of things going on in a Princeton semester and usually a lot of tasks every week. The weekly schedule is designed to give you an at-a-glance view of what you need to be doing for the whole week to make sure you're on track. We have a few thoughts about how to use this schedule most effectively. First, take a look at the semester schedule and write out all the important things you have to do for the coming week. Then write down an amount of time you want to spend on each one. Then start filling in the schedule, making sure you have time you allotted for each one on the schedule. There should be some free time left over; that's good! Some of your initial estimations will be off. If they're too low, this extra time will save the week. Remember, this schedule is only to get an idea of what you have to do to be on track, not what you must be doing every hour of every day.

We also recommend that you carry it around with you and write down what you're doing as the week goes on. After collecting a few weeks of data like this, you may be able to see when and why some parts of your weekly plan go wrong. This information is invaluable in making sure your plans improve in the future.

Daily

We don't have a scheduling item for the daily level since people tend to have their own devices: notebooks, planners, scraps of paper, post-its, etc. However, we do have some notions about what makes for a good daily plan. First, you should set out to do things that are clearly defined, achievable in the time you have, and important. "Write JP" does not belong on a daily list. How about "Add citations to first section" or "Revise paragraphs X and Y"? Making small but regular improvements to the things you're working on is surprisingly effective.

Second, the things you plan to do should be comparable, or at least you should have a sense of their relative importance. Some people make a prioritized list of to-do items, some group them into categories of importance, and some assign each task a point value and set a goal for how many points they should rack up by the end of the day. No matter what you do it, make sure you aren't just working on "Get shampoo" over "Review CHM lecture notes from Tuesday" because it's an easier way to get to cross something off.