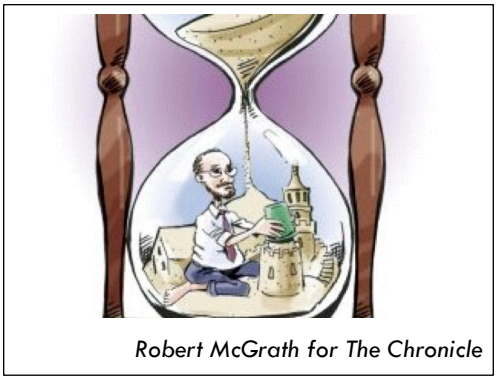
Varieties of Procrastination

By David D. Perlmutter, Chronicle of Higher Education, May 21, 2012



Robert McGrath for The Chronicle

Early in my career my father, also a professor, advised me that if I managed to finish my work—whether it was research, teaching, or service—on time and in the correct format, I would have a huge competitive advantage over many of my peers.

I've always found that principle to be correct and have passed it on to graduate students and tenure-track colleagues. I am shocked at how many academics I've met who had a terrific grant proposal but missed the deadline, or who could have published a great paper in a journal but put off writing the "revise and resubmit" version until too much time had passed.

Procrastination is not always bad: Sometimes the work you put off doing is better left undone. And sometimes the best ideas just come late. But perennially postponing everything until the last minute, especially for the doctoral student and the probationary faculty member, can be a career killer.

Luckily, no matter your particular habits of work or mind, procrastination is not preordained. I know many people who manage to get their work done on time, and at a high standard, yet privately admit they are procrastinators who learned to overcome the tendency, at least some of the time. I believe that, within reason, anyone can learn to be a completer, not a delayer.

What is the real deadline? A few years ago, I was part of a large, multicampus grant proposal that was rejected because of several mix-ups that led to its being submitted a few minutes late to a federal grant-processing Web site. I still grit my teeth remembering that. Even though we had high-powered academic, political, and even military endorsers of our proposal, the guardians of the process rightly upheld their own rules: 12:03 a.m. is past midnight.

Other deadlines are more flexible and subject to change. I have edited five academic books and have learned to build softer due dates into the timetable to allow for the inevitable "I just need one more week" or "I promise I'll get it to you by the end of the month."

One anti-procrastination measure I've seen employed by "on time" academics is to create mini-deadlines that break down the completion of a larger project into smaller segments. Think multiple train stops on the way to the final destination. When I co-write a paper under a conference deadline, for example, I ask my partners to finish the introduction by a certain date, the methodology section by a subsequent date, and so on.

Technology can help, too. I like to create auto-alerts through my calendar or e-mail program that remind me about a deadline. In the era of apps and social media, even more sophisticated software and processes are available to goose you through the management of almost any task.

What is excellence? Many procrastinators claim that their last-minute habit is just a symptom of a more noble character trait: perfectionism. I sympathize and identify with that belief. But over the years, after many discussions with colleagues, we have never agreed on a particular definition of perfection. Has anyone truly written a perfect book or conducted a perfect experiment? Have you ever been completely satisfied with a course you taught? Perfection is something that should be relegated to the realm of the divine.

Academic scholarship and teaching—the two kinds of "professing" we do—are executed within a university system that has certain expectations about our productivity. We have lots of work to get done, every day, and the world cannot wait for us to get it just right.

I recall a discussion with a doctoral student who had taken over teaching a course for the day and was lamenting some of the mistakes he had made. I congratulated him on being a conscientious teacher. He was astonished, but I explained, "When good teachers stumble they figure out what went wrong, get up, dust themselves off, and teach again with solutions in mind. If you think everything you have done in the classroom is perfect, you are delusional."

So don't be too hard on yourself. Do the best job you can with the time and resources you have. Teach the class, publish the essay, and move on (and up) to the next project.

Creating a master plan. As I have advocated before in these columns, I think graduate students and tenure-track faculty members should have a master plan or chart that lays out all of their projects, along with timetables for completion. Technology makes that easier than ever before.

The first key element of your chart should be comprehensiveness. You've probably heard about the problem of asking people engaged in a food study to keep a diary of what they eat: Subjects will mostly be honest but may "forget" to log the midnight Ben & Jerry's binge or the impromptu porterhouse dinner. Likewise, I have met scholars who describe to me a seemingly detailed five-year research plan, only to almost willfully neglect to factor in some additional projects to which they have committed. Delays then ensue on everything.

Second, a planning chart should be realistic about time and resources needed to complete a project. If you are teaching a course you've taught many times before, a week of advance preparation may be all you need. On the other hand, I have heard faculty members, especially young colleagues, forecast unlikely feats of multitasking, as in: "I'll design that new class while I'm at a conference and get that paper done, too. Oh, and did I mention the family is coming along?"

We all underestimate how much time and effort it takes to do anything worth doing. It is better to chart out more days than you'll need and finish early than the opposite.

Expecting the unexpected. An experiment fails or a homework assignment proves too confusing for the students. Your child comes down with chicken pox or a major service project is dropped in your lap. Sometimes there's nothing you can do when confronted with the unexpected but revise your plans.

There are, however, other ways to respond. First, consider whether an obstacle is actually a red flag. A young scientist once described to me a situation in which the completion of an experiment was constantly delayed by anomalous findings. Much puzzling finally resulted in an answer: A particular measurement device had been adjusted incorrectly and was giving the wrong readings.

Experience can be a guide toward expecting the unexpected. The first time I sat down with the intention to write a book, I contacted authors in my field whom I greatly respected and asked for their advice. Many of them offered similar warnings, which I found extremely useful. Whatever project you are undertaking, seek the counsel of some hardy pathfinders who have gone up that trail before.

Quitters can be winners. Sometimes your guiding principle should be "better never than late." It's not my area of research, but I've been fascinated for decades by studies in economics, psychology, and related fields that seem to belie the aphorism "quitters never win and winners never quit." As it turns out, however, some of the world's most successful people—whether inventors, military strategists, politicians, or entrepreneurs—have learned that quitting can be the smart move. A very entertaining edition of the Freakonomics podcast was devoted to the "upside of quitting."

When you find yourself continuously stymied, when problem after problem delays you, when you seem to have lost your enthusiasm for some venture, maybe you *should* just give up. I have a folder on my computer that, in honor of J.R.R. Tolkien, I have titled "unfinished tales." It's filled with research projects I started and then dropped. They number in the dozens. I bet most midcareer academics have a similar depository. Knowing when to quit one project, walk away, and start a new one is a key survival skill in our trade.

Sometimes putting off work is the right choice. One of the joys of the academic career is the longevity of our enterprise. Every few years, I have dipped back into my lost-tales folder and realized that something I had dropped in disgust suddenly makes sense. Or, as often happens in the realm of scholarship, new discoveries or developments assist the resurrection.

A signature case was my own dissertation: a copious census analysis of 40 years of American photojournalism and other kinds of printed imagery of China. I finished it—late, of course. I squeezed a couple of journal articles out of it. But basically, for almost a decade, the data set and analysis sat in file drawers. I assumed that I would never use any of my findings again except perhaps in teaching.

But as time passed, my interest rekindled: Governments released additional archives; more insiders in China and elsewhere published memoirs. A whole new set of wonderful, exciting data and scholarship became available, and I was hooked. In 2007, 13 years after the original analysis, my book *Picturing China in the American Press* was published. So sometimes procrastination is a sensible reminder to put something aside until you can complete it to the standard to which you aspire.

Dare to be early. I was born in a certain central European country famous for its mountains, cheese, and punctuality. I endure tremendous stress if I am running late to any event and am known for always arriving early—sometimes far too early. Nevertheless, I think earliness is as much a positive trait for an academic in the 21st century as it was for those adhering to the old English proverb "the early bird catcheth the worm."

Finishing work early has the following benefits. First, you pleasantly surprise others. Deans, grant-program officers, and journal editors have smiled with favor upon my petitions or submissions because I was first in line.

I have also gotten good feedback from people sometimes because they had the extra time to review my work. That can help internally as well. Get a task done early, and you can let it sit for a while and return to it with fresh eyes before the deadline. Finally, finishing something promptly creates more time for other important tasks, including finding some balance of work and family.

Procrastination is not a sin. Good things can indeed come late, and sometimes putting off is better than going with something that is truly not ready for the classroom or the journal. But graduate school and the tenure track have deadlines with consequences. Put off *everything* until the last minute, and you will perennially fall behind, disappoint others, and hurt your reputation. So learn when it's OK to be late, and when you're only hurting yourself.

David D. Perlmutter is director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication and a professor and Starch Faculty Fellow at the University of Iowa. His book "Promotion and Tenure Confidential" was published by Harvard University Press in 2010.

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