Improving Time Management and Organization
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Three Key Time Management Concepts to Consider:

1. Saving and Making Time

If you think about it, there are three key ways to be more productive - learning how to do a task in less time, using time for a task you otherwise would not have used productively, and delegating /sharing the task with someone else. (Delegating is a pretty risky strategy when it comes to college studying; however, it isn't impossible if you have a reliable study partner/group!) A lot of the strategies we will discuss are related to the first two ways.

2. Time Compounding

If I ask you about how much additional time you could make available to study each day, what would be a good guess? 1 hour? 30 minutes? 10 minutes? Most of us can't find an extra hour! But what about an extra 10 or 15 minutes to devote to studying? Sounds reasonable, but would it make much of a difference? SURE - 10 minutes a day times 6 days a week is 1 extra hour of study time. Assuming you have a class that has 3 tests over a 15 week session, that would be 5 extra hours to study for each test! Sounds better now, doesn't it? It is likely that you can find little bits of time throughout your day to turn into valuable study time - they will add up and pay big dividends (get it -time compounding?!)!

3. Memory Power

You know what often happens as soon as you learn something for the first time - you start to lose it! In many courses, your ability to recall information is vital to your success in a course. So, what does this have to do with managing your time? Think about it this way - THE LONGER YOU WAIT after the first time you learn something to go back over it to make sure it is still in your head and makes sense, THE MORE TIME IT WILL TAKE to do the task! See the connection?

Eight Key Time Management Principles to Consider:

1. Prioritize Your Tasks

Many times we are so busy we forget to look at the big picture and ask ourselves "is this the best thing to be doing now?" For me, this is one of the hardest tasks (along with breaking down large tasks into smaller ones - see below). I know I'm working hard and getting a lot done, but am I really doing the highest priority task? We will talk about to-do lists in detail shortly, but it certainly this is a good place to start. If you have lists of tasks to do all in one place, it makes picking the right thing to do now easier. The literature on highly successful people indicates that they are often list makers as well as goal setters. Alan Lakein, a time management guru, offers a simple way to prioritize your to-do list(s). He suggests labeling the items in your list as "A", "B", or "C" items based on the following: "A" items are both important and urgent, "B" items are important but not urgent, and "C" items are neither important nor urgent. It seems that the value here is in the process of once a day, for instance, taking a few minutes to look over your lists and make judgements about the order for completion of the items.

2. Develop Routines

It is true for most of us that anything that becomes a routine takes less time and is more likely to get done (think about your routines for bedtime, cleaning up after meals, doing the lawn, when you first get to work, or get ready to leave work, etc.).   Whether related to studying in a traditional course or completing an online course, routines can help you save time. It may be setting aside a certain part of each weekend (like Sunday evening) for review or work on an on-going project, or it might be going to the library or learning center each day after math to start on the homework (relate this example to "memory power" above). Over and over, students tell me that having a few routines helps them to feel more "in control" of their time.

3. Review New Material ASAP

This one again relates "memory power" and time management.   Again, so many students have talked about the value of going over new material very soon after class as a way to "solidify it".   It may be listening to a lecture or reading the text and then reviewing the notes later that day or the next day. Much of what we learn is lost within 24 to 48 hours (50-80%) - so, the longer we wait to review the longer it will take to check our learning and re-learn the material we have lost.

4. Use Peak Times to Study

Are you a "morning person"? A "night owl"? We all have times of day when we are more alert and times when we are less alert. And, while I realize that we can't always take advantage of this because of the realities of our lives, there can be some benefits of using this concept in even some small way. The key is to try to do the most challenging tasks at your peak times and try to do the less challenging work at the slump times. Maybe it will just be for one particular task, like accounting or math. If you have a task that requires a great deal of brainpower and concentration, picking a peak time (or at least not a slump time) will hopefully improve your effectiveness and save you time.

5. Set Mini-Goals and Give Yourself Mini-Rewards

I often come to TC3 on the weekends to do school-related work in my office. When I have essay tests to correct, I usually procrastinate and wind up coming in to the College on Sunday and sitting down with the entire stack, knowing that I have to stay with the task until they are all corrected. After correcting several, my mind starts to wander and I want to "stray" - even the candy machine "calls out" to me: "Rick, there are M and M's in here with your name on them". At that point, I try to set a mini-goal and mini-reward!   I'll say to myself: "Rick, if you correct 10 more exams, then you can go take an M and M break". Now you know what I mean. For some of us, making a little "self-contract" helps us to be more productive.   It can be "I'm going to do 5 more math problems and then I'll call Jamal" or "I'm going to work for 2 hours and, then watch the newest episode of "Game of Thrones" or "I'm going to read chapter 4, then have some ice cream, and then answer the end-of-chapter review questions ".

6. Double up Your Tasks

When you are listening to a recording of a lecture while driving to work, you're doubling up. When you tape a diagram of a plant cell on your bathroom mirror and quiz your self on the parts while brushing your teeth, you're doubling up. Doubling up is combining a school-related task with a task that doesn't require much "brain power". You would be surprised at the opportunities that you might find to do your studying at the same time you are doing something else! (Laundry, lawn, ironing, walking the dog, riding the bus, etc.)

7. Break up Large Tasks
When you have lots of smaller tasks and a few larger ones, it can be hard to get to the big ones. You may realize that the large task requires more than one or two hours and be thinking that at some later point you will try to set aside a whole day; the result may be that the task gets put off. If you can break the large task into smaller, "sub-tasks", you might be able to pick away at it in more manageable bites. If you take a little time to do a task analysis, you might be able to break the task down and start to work on it right away. This is true for large projects, papers, and even studying for larger exams. You can make a list of the steps involved, the estimated time for each step, and a sub-deadline date for each step. (One key, from my experience, is to be very specific and detailed in your description of the tasks in each step.) Now, you can make one step at a time an "A" priority item, make progress, and feel a sense of satisfaction as you check off the steps one at a time.

8. Use Little Bits of Time
The last time I was in the doctor's office, I waited about 15 minutes until I got into the examining room and about another 25 minutes until I actually saw the doctor. Rather than being annoyed (like I was the last time), I planned ahead and brought a professional journal with me. I read 2 articles and didn't mind the half-hour wait. The key was in recognizing when those little bits of time are likely to occur and having prepared so I had something beneficial to do. So many times we have to wait: for the bus, for the pasta water to boil, for the teacher to show up in the classroom, etc. Remember the time compounding concept? Those little bits can really add up! Imagine if you had 5 minutes each day to review a key concept you learned earlier that day or the day before. The way to make these little bits useful (even 3 or 4 minutes) is to have something "ready to go" so when you go: "Aha! Here's a little bit." You can dive right in. If you have to look for something to review at that point, you will lose precious time. So, have a pack of study cards in your pocket, put a sticky note in your textbook when you see an important chart or a good set of review questions, etc. and you'll be set for using the little bits of "waiting time" that inevitably come up.

Some Key Organization Techniques to Consider:
 For many people, organizing activities are worthwhile because they save time and aggravation. If you can't find something you need to be able to sit down to study (like the book, your notes, the assignment, your pen, etc.), it wastes your precious time and may wreck your attitude as well. If, by the time you actually get started on the task, you're already frustrated, how likely is it you will perform at a peak level?
We are all comfortable with different levels of organization. The following ideas and materials are offered to you based on my experience and the experience of a lot of students over the years.

On Keeping Track of Your Tasks, Events, etc.:
Many people keep some kind of weekly or monthly planner with them. Some keep track of events, meetings, etc. on a home calendar. Still others keep everything in their head. Again, everyone is different and has different needs. The question is:"Is your system for keeping track of things working well?"   Are you finding that your system saves you time and hassles or wastes time and creates problems?

Many people (students and others) find that one key is to have all components of their system together in one place.   Keeping your calendar, your to-do lists, your assignments, etc. in one place saves time.   A second key is to carry your system with you most of the time. (To that end, you might look at the size of your organizing system to see if a pocket/purse-sized system makes sense for you.) Nothing fancy is needed; a portfolio with pockets or a notebook (binder) will work. A trip to a store like Staples or Office Max is a great way to see what is available and to find materials that make sense for you.   Also, your computer, (at home or work) may have scheduling/organizing software, which lets you custom design and print forms (including calendar pages). More and more students are using their cell phones or tablet as their planner and appointment reminder; many free "apps" are available.

As usual, the key is developing the habit of using the system you create. If you aren't using it, then ask yourself if changing the system in some way would make it more useable. Again, check out a store with lots of organizing materials and you might just be able to create something that's just right for you!

On Keeping Track of Your Notes, Handouts, etc.:
Again, a trip to a store like Staples or Office Max might be helpful to you in selecting materials that will work for you. It is amazing how much material you can accumulate (handouts, tests, papers, notes, etc.) in a single course. Again, the key is to be able to access what you want quickly so you can get down to business.

Some related odds and ends:
-Students sometimes buy a 3-hole punch so they can put handouts, tests, and returned work in a binder.
-Students sometimes prefer a loose-leaf notebook (over spiral-bound) for class notes so they have more flexibility. You can take the pages out to study them; pull out, rewrite and insert clean, organized notes at a later point; add notes when you missed a class.
-Color-coding can help. Either by using colored binders or by using colored labels. Each course can have its own color - for example, the book, notebook, and folder for ENGL 101 can all be blue. It can save a little time and frustration when you are rushed.
-More and more students are buying an inexpensive file cabinet (or cardboard file boxes). This, along with some file folders and labels, makes a great system for easily storing and accessing papers, tests, notes, handouts, etc.

On Organizing Your Work Space:
Your workspace can go a long way help or hurt your efficiency and effectiveness.   Again, there is no right or wrong. It is a matter of evaluating what you have now and seeing if there are any changes you can make to improve the situation for yourself. Can you make changes that would help you to get down to business quicker, be more comfortable, and stay on task longer?
For many students, it is very useful to have a space they only associate with studying. If you associate the area with eating, paying bills, or watching TV, you can imagine the potential distraction. One thing I see often is people using the dining room table to study. This causes a real time-wasting situation because of all of the set- it-up/take-it-down times.

For most people it makes sense to have a space you can set up and leave as you wish. Often, I hear students say they need a bigger space than their small desk. I, too, need to be able to spread things out. I encourage students to use plywood sheets, card tables, etc. to provide themselves with the extra workspace they need. Some students have taken over a spare bedroom, attic, etc. so they can have a larger, private space.

Again, a small file cabinet can also be a good investment to help with organization (you can get one with a lock if you are worried about your things disappearing). A small bookshelf can be a big help, too.

Here are a few other thoughts about your workspace, related to improving your performance. There are many factors to consider when trying to optimize your study area. Light, heat, fresh air, noise, visual stimuli are all relevant factors to some of us. Think about which ones affect you and try to do what you can to control them. I have a small (9") fan in my 10' by 10' office - it really keeps things cooler and keeps the air from getting stale when the door is closed (our windows don't open). Lots of people like to have two sources of light to help eliminate glare. When I work on the dining room table at home (I know, I know), I have to bring a floor lamp in from the living room, otherwise the glare is unbearable (funny how it never bothers me when I'm eating). I know students who use earplugs to control noise; there are cheap foam ones you can get from sporting goods stores. Others use music to filter out distractions (music with a consistent beat, few changes in loudness, and no lyrics have been shown to work best). You get the idea - small changes in your workspace can pay big dividends by improving how well you learn and how long you can stay on task.