

Case studies are an effective way of illustrating the kind of time management issues that frequently arise with students, and the strategies that might be used to support and develop these practices. The case studies below are adapted from genuine consultations with students (with details changed to protect confidentiality).

Case study 1: Using best times for studying

Dina was a 2nd year Law student who was struggling to complete her assignment because she was unable to concentrate on reading. She described reading the same page over and over again without understanding or remembering what she'd just read, eventually giving up in despair. Dina described herself as someone who loved reading, who habitually read for pleasure and whose only real problems were on focusing on academic reading. She feared that this difficulty might be a symptom of her being "not clever enough" for her very competitive course.

Discussion focused on how Dina organised her study time. She had lectures three mornings a week, so had got into the habit of using her afternoons for studying in the library. However, her lack of concentration was frustrating and depressing her; after a few hours attempting to read, she would just go home and spend the evening trying to cheer herself up by watching television or chatting with her friends.

The adviser explained to Dina that some times of day can be better for focusing on difficult tasks. Dina agreed that (like most people) she found it easiest to focus in the mornings and most difficult after lunch: however, this was when she was attempting the study tasks that needed most concentration. It was suggested that Dina make a timetable, committing herself to studying at her best times, and that she kept time in the afternoons when she tended to lose focus for doing chores, answering emails, going to the gym etc. The adviser also explained how she could use active reading and note-making practices to make her reading more productive.

Dina returned a week later, delighted and relieved to report that she had started to make sense of her reading and was well on the way to completing her assignment. She was using her early afternoons to take more exercise and socialise, and felt that this was helping her to clear her head before starting to work again in the late afternoon.

Case study 2: Dealing with overwhelm

Leroy was in the final year of a Geography degree. Having thrown himself into university life with enthusiasm, he was now Entertainment Editor of the weekly student newspaper and president of the Geography Society. These commitments took up a substantial amount of time, in addition to which Leroy was trying to complete a 12,000 word dissertation, two essays, and begin his revision for Finals. He felt completely overwhelmed and had got to the stage where he could not decide what to do first, and so was doing nothing. This was increasing his anxiety.

The adviser suggested that, as a first step, Leroy should list everything he had to do with the dates he had to do them by. Although Leroy was worried that seeing it all written down would make him feel more stressed, he made the list and decided with the adviser on a few quick tasks to tackle straightaway to free up his study paralysis.

Returning the next day with a few things already ticked off the list, Leroy said that he now felt optimistic that he could complete the rest. However he was advised that, with Finals coming up, it might be time to take a more realistic view and consider what he needed to prioritise. Leroy reluctantly agreed that he should relinquish at least one of his extra-curricula responsibilities to focus on study. That agreed, his larger study tasks (completing his

dissertation, revising for Finals) were broken down into smaller steps to provide a series of achievable goals. Lastly, he was asked to mark up a realistic set of tasks he wanted to complete by the end of the week.

Returning two weeks later, Leroy agreed that although he found it difficult to give up some of the positions he'd worked hard to achieve, he did now feel more in control of his time. He could now visualise his tasks as staging posts on a linear path to be followed to his goal - to complete his degree and get the good marks he deserved.

Case study 3: Transition to independent study

Andrew had just completed his first term as a Fresher. He had submitted all but one of his assignments, but all had been late. In addition he had received low marks for the submitted work, with comments on his poor expression, lack of structure and incorrect referencing. He had been sent to the learning development service to inquire about assessment for dyslexia.

Initial discussion suggested that Andrew was unlikely to have a specific learning difficulty: he was able to self-correct his writing and reported no problems with slowness in reading or communicating his ideas. He admitted that he had completed the submitted assignments at the last minute and had not had enough time to proof read or check proper referencing procedure. In addition, he felt that spending time on planning his work would have held him up even further, so had just started writing, referring to texts as he went along.

Andrew complained that all of his deadlines had come at the same time, and that he had not been given guidance on how many or which texts to read from the extensive reading list provided. Closer questioning showed that Andrew had come directly from a small school where he had had a lot of input from teaching staff with his organization and other study practices. It was suggested that he set his own deadlines, spreading them out and starting in good time to make sure his assignments were completed. He was shown how to plan his workload, and to set himself a flexible study timetable for each week. Two more sessions were booked in which Andrew was given advice on selective reading, effective proof reading, correct referencing and how to prepare for and write assignments.

Andrew returned later in the year for help with planning his revision, and was able to report that he had submitted all of his assignments for the previous term on time, and had improved his marks.

Case study 4: Procrastination

Polly had been studying for a Masters degree in Psychology for nearly two years, having transferred her registration from full-time to part-time, and had not yet submitted a single piece of work. She had had support from her GP for a string of extensions to deadlines, on the grounds of her anxiety attacks. However, these were now being exacerbated by her inability to work.

Discussion of her past learning experiences showed that Polly had been a high achiever who nevertheless lacked confidence in her abilities. Unclear about what the move up to Masters level study meant, she had become extremely anxious about the quality of her first assignment. Having been given a fairly open extension deadline in the first place, Polly was now stuck in a vicious circle where the longer she put off handing in work, the better she felt her tutor would expect it to be. So she was experiencing a constant need to revise and perfect her work.

While it was clear that Polly needed a referral to counselling to work through the underlying issues that were making her so anxious about failure and criticism, the immediate task was to try to break this circle. Having selected an assignment, Polly was asked first to explain verbally one of her main points, then to write these in bullet points, and finally to make them into a draft paragraph. This was used as a jumping off point to illustrate expectations in postgraduate work, and after revising, Polly agreed that the adviser could show it to her tutor for further feedback. It was suggested that she might use a private blog to write draft sections of work, with the new format defusing her academic concerns. By reframing writing as a development process rather than a perfected product, Polly was gradually enabled to submit 'good enough' work, although she continued to receive support throughout her studies.

For more on time management and other learning areas, see the LearnHigher website at www.learnhigher.ac.uk