

Healthy Work Habits

We're concerned about how academic culture pushes scholars at all career levels and in different job types to constantly be busy to the point of being extremely overworked. We here at the RSA adapted materials written by Ada Palmer, Associate Professor at the University of Chicago and member of the inaugural RSA Mentoring Program Committee, to post on our website as part of our first mentorship cycle.

Think Long-Term

Learning to use your time well and take care of yourself so you are happy and productive is *just as important* as learning your field. If your current workload seems like too much, don't assume nothing can be done. You can learn to accomplish more in less time, if you remember to (A) plan your time carefully, and (B) pay yourself first.

Plan Your Time

"I Don't Have Enough Time!" We believe you. Time is a rare and precious resource. But that doesn't mean you should reconcile yourself to being constantly overwhelmed. If you feel that you work to exhaustion every day, but still don't have enough time to complete everything, you don't need to work more. You need to *work less but accomplish more* in the hours you do work, and reserve other time for rest and fun.

Pay Yourself First

Never feel that hobbies, leisure activities, exercise, or rest are "taking time away from" your studies or research.

Give Your Best Hours to Your Most Important Tasks

Our ability to work and concentrate varies over time. An hour of work put in when you are at 100% may produce as much as two hours when you are not at your best. Your ability to work is conditioned by **(A) circumstantial factors** such as workspace comfort, **(B) metabolic factors** such as nutrition and time of day, **(C) sleep**, and **(D) mental health factors** such as stress management, socializing, and fun. If you maximize the *quality* of your working hours you genuinely can reduce the *quantity*.

- **Accountability** can be a big help. Create your own deadlines and rules, like "5 pages by X date" or "Finish researching X topic in Y month" or "Always exercise M/W/F/Sat" or "Always have meals with a friend 2x per week." Self-imposed deadlines can help you stick to your long-term tasks and leisure/rest plans.

- o You can set aside certain hours of the day, or times during the week, exclusively for long-term tasks or leisure/rest and make the self-imposed rule never to let short-term tasks violate those protected hours.
- o There are many free or inexpensive productivity/accountability apps/programs that let you make daily task lists, to-do lists, “good habit” lists, and check them off daily. Many people like a program called Habitica because its gamification adds extra motivation, but other popular options include List.ly, Todoist, 30/30, DropTask, GTasks, Limitless, and Zenday.
- o You could pick a “writing buddy” or “research buddy” and pledge to each achieve a certain amount each week; keeping up with a friend keeps you motivated.
- **Not all hours are equal.** You concentrate and think better at some times of day than others. Try varying what time of day you do different things and observe when your most productive hours are, so you can give them to your most important tasks. Many of us tend to do e-mail, short-term assignments, grading, and paperwork tasks earlier in the day to “get them out of the way” before settling down to research and writing, but this means giving your best hours to minor tasks and approaching your most important work when you are already tired. Try reversing the order, setting aside an hour or two for research and writing before other tasks.
- **Track your time** to learn where your hours really go. Try for a week or two keeping a time diary, where you write down the time at which you begin every activity. You may discover that days that feel like they are completely full of academic work actually contain many secondary tasks or “time traps” which could be reduced.
- **Set aside time for long-term tasks.** It is very demoralizing to feel that you are working all day every day and yet your big projects aren’t progressing. Reserve at least a small amount of time regularly to work on your big projects, even if it’s a tiny amount. Whether you try 30 minutes a day, or a couple hours at a set time each week, holding yourself to a steady minimum of focus on your long-term goals will achieve a lot.

Resources we like

Free

- [ADHD Survival Guide: How I Stopped Procrastinating](#) guide
- [Noisli](#) background noise generator
- [The Only Five Email Folders Your Inbox Will Ever Need](#) article
- [Word Sprints](#): timed, goal-focused writing sprints with or without friends

Paid

- [Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life](#) book
- [How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing](#) book
- [National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity](#) (free if your institution has a membership)
- [Scrivener](#) writing software