Time Management Strategies

Advanced Dornsife PhD graduate students from the three division were canvased to gather time management strategies they have found to be successful. They were also asked, “if they could do one thing over again what would they do?” A compendium of their responses is provided below.

1. **Do you have any specific time management techniques you use?**

   **Set aside time to think and plan** about what needs to be accomplished.
   
   e.g., **Sunday Meeting**
   
   e.g., Every morning, I will think through what is my plan for today. I will try to be productive and goal-oriented. For example, I will learn a specific concept, or finish one proposal. It is very easy to get lost by reading papers without questions and purposes. You may find yourself browsing papers for the whole day without learning anything. So being goal-oriented is important.

   **Create an expected timeline for your entire Ph.D.** This concrete plan makes it easier to know what to expect.

   **Break down larger tasks** into smaller chunks and create to do lists. Crossing off small tasks can help provide a sense of accomplishment and can help avoid burn out.

   Before I go to bed every day, I plan out the following day in hour-long chunks and schedule manageable tasks for each hour of the day. I also make sure to schedule breaks — for meals, for quick walks, for time with friends — and a new goal that I’m setting for myself is to stop working after dinnertime as much as possible.

   **Create a calendar**
   Many students use Google calendars as well as simple “old school” paper planners or lists they keep on their phones. Some students color code activities to distinguish writing and scholarship from social, fun, and recreational activities.

   **Work backward from the due date when scheduling** to get a better idea of the length of time available that can be scheduled relative to other deadlines and commitments.

   **Schedule different activities** even mundane ones e.g., doing laundry, grocery shopping as well as enjoyable ones e.g., meeting with friends, the gym, yoga, getting outdoors.

   **Blocking out time and rarely deviating** from the task assigned to that block of time helps prevent distraction and procrastination.

   For exams: Study calendars that plot out what needs to be reviewed. These helped prioritize the most critical concepts and problems and move on at a good pace.

   **Keep both long- and short-term goals.** What are you doing this afternoon? Next week? Next year? This will help you stay on track to graduate in a reasonable amount of time.
Create a work/life balance. If you work at 100% capacity 100% of the time, you WILL burn out. When you are in lab, be present and focused, and when you're at home, relax! This compartmentalization will help prevent burnout.

At the same time, show dedication to your lab/project/rotation by showing up every day (M-F) for consistent hours and getting work done.

Read papers during wait steps, or during down time in rotations. This will help you learn about your project and contribute original ideas to your experiments.

Create “to do list” and number them in the order to be accomplished which helps the desire to procrastinate, thought has already been given to what’s important and what is due next.

Track progress not completeness

Find out what time of day you work best, and put in as many hours as you can during that time. Figure out the routine that makes you feel good and gets as much work as you can. Don’t always expect or seek perfection. Completing course work is not the same as submitting to a journal. Professor have high expectations for course work, but there is no need to stay up very late into the night to perfect something that has little consequence outside of class.

Learn “how” to read a book. You are not going to read every page of three or more hefty academic books every week. Don’t try. Learn how to read the most important sections (Intro, conclusion, one or two interesting chapters, index), and skim the rest. Be able to talk about the book in class, but you’re not going to be interrogated about super specific details. For books highly pertinent to your research, it is a different story. These you will want to eventually find the time to completely read. Keep a list of books you’d like to return to during the summer or winter break, and when you have the spare time, read broadly.

Read in a balanced way. Different types of reading demand different kinds of attention. Make your way through the readings in a way that feels balanced. If you are getting bogged down in an historical text, switch to a novel etc.

Communicate with your mentors/advisor to help you prioritize what needs to be accomplished. Don’t be afraid to inform your professors of reasonable commitments and responsibilities, academic or not, which might be temporarily diverting your time and energy.

Meet regularly with your advisors, weekly meeting can help to set short-term deadlines that will keep you on track.

Treat your graduate program like a job. Set working hours and stick to them. Resist taking long coffee or lunch breaks, think about your time as working professionals do.

Think about every task as a project and devoted everyday to accomplishing a project.

The PLAN technique:
P - Prioritize the tasks according to due date and time needed to complete,
L - **List** them in order from high to low priority,
A - **Attack** them head-on so as they aren’t left hanging over me as time goes on,
N - **Nap** in order to make sure I am well-rested and relax from time to time.

**Pomodoro strategy** – work for a certain amount of minutes and take a scheduled break time, to help keep the focus throughout the day.

2. **How do you manage to get all the work done?**

It isn’t easy, and it is nearly impossible to get,

**Prioritize** what is absolutely required of you and work on that. Identify low-priority tasks and let them go when there simply isn’t enough time.

**Realizing** that you might not be able to get all the work done.

**List the top 3-4 goals** for each day and concentrate on those only.

**Find a rhythm that works for you,** experiment to determine how much you can complete and how much time it takes. If you have a hard time starting projects work in long blocks of time rather than 1 hour intervals. Perhaps working 5-7 hours and then taking the evening or the next day off after that.

**List all the deadlines for each task** and then create a schedule for each day for accomplishing the tasks by the deadline.

**Get started on final essays as soon as possible.**

**Start projects as early as possible and to ask for help** from professors and peers as much as possible. By starting early, you’ll be in a position to see some previously unforeseen problems and obstacles earlier than you otherwise would. By asking for help, not only will you feel less isolated from others in your work, but you’ll likely be exposed to potential solutions and approaches that you wouldn’t have thought about on your own. This can save a lot of time.

**Plan to complete things before the deadline** to account for unexpected outcomes (e.g., needing more time to revise a paper or to move a project up because other projects fall on the day of the week with other deadlines already in place)

**Getting all your work accomplished is a skill** that improves over time with practice and with learning good habits, such as daily writing.

**Better to be productive than count how long one spends in the office.** When I am no longer not productive anymore, I would rather talk to people or go to the gym, or even go for a hike. The PhD is a long process. We need to learn to enjoy the process.

**Bear in mind that you will not finish all the task** you set out to perform. This may be because of shifting priorities or simply because there is only so much time in one day.
Find something that works for you, bullet journals, excel spreadsheets, planners, notebooks, etc. and stick with it. Remember, that the workload ebbs and flows. It’s particularly hectic when you’re trying to publish or do revisions and when your up for your quals, but keep in mind that there is light at the end of the stress tunnel.

3. How do you keep track of everything that needs to be accomplished?

In terms of my dissertation, I kept handwritten notebooks of all the quotations I want to use as I read books and articles (under headings for each work I’m referencing, and PAGE NUMBERS!). The longhand version of things is less and less common, but it helps to flip through a book rather than scroll endlessly. I labelled a notebook by topic (ie., “the archive”), and filled it. When I got later in the process of writing, or really dug in on a chapter, I cut stickie notes and used a color and letter or to denote which chapter/topic I thought that quotation belonged to. Once I used a quotation, I covered it up with another stickie note. This helped a lot as I went through and was processing information I wrote down — whatever was covered up, I didn’t have to think about anymore.

Planners with deadlines for manuscripts, grants, journals, reviews with a mini-timeline that breaks down tasks for each project to be completed each day. This helps build momentum for new projects and also ensures that I don’t procrastinate and wait until the last minute.

A study calendar and planner – were my main tools last year. This year I’ve also started filling out a sort of “timesheet” where I both plan what I’m going to do/have done that day and how long I want to spend on it. Some days you need to just focus on one thing and think deeply and some days you’re leaping from task to task – what’s awesome about the academic lifestyle is that you get to do both... but then what’s hard is that you have to do both.

Lists and schedules work for me. I am a visual person so seeing what I need to do helps. I don’t use any specific software. Usually the notes app on my phone works or Evernote. Whenever I am assigned something or there’s something that needs to be done, I add it to my list and also if it’s an appointment I immediately schedule it into my calendar. I learned long ago that as much as I’d like to believe I’ll remember to do it later, I know I won’t.

In the planning process I have broad categories where I fill in tasks for each category. For instance, when I was taking classes, I would list out the tasks for the week under each class. Now that I am no longer taking classes, I have broad titles such as IRB approval, contacting participants, submission for publication etc. As the week progresses, I continue updating the tasks that I need to do either that week or in the future. Additionally, I use my agenda to list out tasks.

4. Do you use apps or software for time management/organizational purposes and if so, which ones?

Google’s universe of apps and products- to do lists in Google Keep (notes app) and for everything else I use Google calendar. The beauty is that everything syncs up between apps and devices.

Google Calendar to plan experiment timelines (“only started in 4th year wish they had started sooner”).

Gmail for my day-to-day projects, iCal for meetings and deadlines, and Excel for semester long snapshots.
Focus Keeper, which is a timer that allows for me to set a block of time to work and then a block of time to rest.

Forest time management app, which locks your phone for a designated amount of time, and if you don’t use your phone during that time period, you grow a little digital tree. If you cave and do check your phone, your tree withers and dies. It sounds silly, but knowing that your tree will die really does keep you from checking your phone, so I like it because it keeps me from getting distracted. In general, I try to keep me phone far away from my workspace, and I turn off my messages on my computer. It’s wild how much time things like social media and messages take away from your day.

Task management system Rescue time, which syncs with your cell phone and your laptop use. From there you can assess how you are using your time on the internet.

Asana. Task manager, it takes some effort up front, but it is useful in the long run.

I’ve used a few different programs for note-taking. I started out with OneNote while doing coursework, but switched to Evernote when studying for my qualifying exams. I think Evernote is easier to organize, and I like that you can easily upload articles, images, and other resources to the app. It also works well across devices. I also use Zotero as my citation manager, which is invaluable when it comes to writing papers. The notetaking function of Zotero is pretty basic, but the citations are easy to insert and modify. I can’t stress how much time this will save you!

Dropbox and Google Drive (for USC’s unlimited storage)

Evernote to keep track of research ideas, iPhone Notes app for general stuff, Google calendar for meetings, Google Sheets/docs for other top-down planning/organizing

For technical projects I use Atlassian JIRA for Agile development or use issue tracking in GitHub or Bitbucket. For general planning, I sometimes use Google Tasks or just a list on a piece of paper.

Zotero for organizing literature review.

5. Have you engaged with any resources at USC that have been helpful managing the workload?

Occupational Therapy Services at USC since they have a program specifically designed for students, staff, and faculty. My OT sits down with me and reviews my calendar/goals and helps me reorganize or shift my perspective on my work ethic in terms of how much I can do versus can’t do. It’s great to have an outside perspective and it also holds you accountable (if you are like me, who needs a person to check in and make sure you’re moving forward.

Having a therapist helps at a few dollars a session this was one of the greatest gifts USC gave me. Therapists can certainly help with helping manage the workload – and so much more you will face as a graduate student.
Libraries journal access has been indispensable for my research and qualifying exams. The environment is also quiet and well-lit and a wonderful place to study.

Reaching out to research and subject librarians has been helpful when I hit a snag in developing a seminar paper, journal article, or other essay. Because they are so knowledgeable about the university’s collections, they can help you work through a research problem much more quickly than if you were to sort through it on your own.

Study groups (especially for the reading lists) to help get through some of the most daunting tasks together (and stay accountable to each other to get the work done.

Library workshops on citations management and literature review at the library run by Elizabeth Galoozis (She’s awesome). Reaching out to research and subject librarians has been helpful when I hit a snag in developing a seminar paper, journal article, or other essay. Because they are so knowledgeable about the university’s collections, they can help you work through a research problem much more quickly than if you were to sort through it on your own.

USC’s writing center has help with writing and editing and ultimately this has helped me manage my workload.

USC’s mindfulness courses. There are even online courses you can do on your own time.

National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity. I am in love with the dissertation success program which is a 12-week online course that helps you think about how to schedule your time in the long-term and short-term.

6. **How do you keep from getting discouraged about the workload?**

1) Try not to participate in those conversations where people are complaining because they make the work seem worse and less manageable than it is. I think that a lot of the discouragement comes from talking with other PhD students. Sometimes I think that we get a perverse pleasure out of complaining about the workload, and I am no exception! But I think that those conversations only generate excess anxiety and that makes the discouragement worse.

Accept that the workload can be discouraging, and that’s just part of the process. Sometimes admitting that it’s hard and discouraging, rather than denying that aspect of the doctorate, is helpful.

I accept that I may not finish everything (sometimes the workload is just impossible, and that’s okay!), but I can do well enough and this makes me feel less discouraged.

Try to have a life outside your workload — this is something you must cultivate and care about way beyond graduate school. The academics who are petty, cruel, and unprofessional often have nothing outside their job. Get as much done as you can, but also do things that are important to who you are outside the classroom and away from your desk.

Creating a regular time for rest, social activities, and other things that have nothing to do with your academic work will make you a better scholar. Your general wellness (physical, mental, emotional, etc.) is just as deserving of your time and attention. I practice yoga and take daily walks with my dog to clear
my head. I try to take a spontaneous day trip once a month to get outside of my bubble and to spend time with loved ones. I'm also lucky to have a great working relationship with my advisor, so I find that conversations with him remind me of my purpose in pursuing a PhD, which is easy to lose sight of during the first few years.

See the workload as leading to something else, something bigger than its parts. For instance, when I write a paper for class, I immediately start exploring opportunities to present the paper at a conference; in other words, instead of complaining about having to write multiple papers, I get excited by multiple publishing or conference-presentation opportunities.

Talk to other students, particularly older ones! They are usually very empathetic and give you perspective, which is usually that you are doing your best and that’s more than enough! I think students often feel like they’re behind other students, but in reality, they’re not.

Have genuine interest in the research topics.

Talking about why I care about the work with friends, family and colleagues and why it is interesting – sort of selling it – helps me reset.

Take one weekend day off to spend time with friends and family; but if that isn’t possible, I’ll take an evening off over the weekend to socialize.

When I am feeling the most discouraged I constantly tell myself that I always get the work done in the end and this won’t be any different. I have been in school since I was five years old and in all those years I have been able to get the work done.

Many of us are high-achieving scholars and have gotten to that level by attaching self-worth to academic performance. This is a recipe for disaster in a biology graduate program, because the science doesn’t always behave as we’d like it to. A few pieces of advice for this tricky topic: 1) let the data tell you the outcome, rather than predicting/influencing the experiments. 2) design experiments where both the positive or negative outcome is scientifically interesting. 3) DON'T attach your self-worth to the success of your experiments. 4) DO find a hobby, activity, workout routine, creative outlet, community volunteer opportunity, etc, that you can participate in and feel pride in. I promise this will help you get through the overwhelming times in lab.

7. How do you find time to do things other than your scholarship?

"Time away” from my scholarship ultimately strengthens my work, if only to give me more energy to dive back in. I honestly believe my weekly Dungeons and Dragons sessions helped me through my Ph.D. Beyond that, doing what makes you feel good about yourself is absolutely vital. Exercise — not “look good,” but for mental health — is so important. Getting out into nature, and there is a lot of it in LA, helps, too. Whatever doesn’t feel stressful or even de-stresses you is something to find and do to help get you through the next several years!

Make your hobby a routine.
One of the big secrets, I feel, is that it's next to impossible to do everything, and the faculty knows that. For example, once I learned that most professors expected us to skim the readings rather than read every single work, I started moving through my work more quickly. And rather than fill that open time with more work, I set it aside for myself.

Try to see school as one part—a big part, but not the only part—of life. Maintain non-school social activities, keep up with friends, and y

8. If you could do one thing over again, as a first-year, what would it be?

I would think harder about how a particular assignment can benefit me down the road. I would also worry less about navigating the different personalities one encounters during the first year.

Keep all your syllabi, and really pay attention to how your teacher conducts their class. If you would do it differently, why and how? The undercurrent of the graduate experience is discerning how you want to teach (if that is your goal). I wish I had paid more attention earlier on. Also, buy a notebook for each class and take notes in class. It took me a semester to realize not doing this was a detriment. You never know if you’ll be called upon to teach such a class — or at the very least use a nugget of insight for your dissertation — so, take notes. Do this longhand. There is a wealth of research about the hinderances of typing ideas and notes versus writing them. Look it up.

Be optimistic in life and in myself.

Be more confident in myself. It is easy to question myself since all my classmates are super smart and hardworking. But things will get better if you work hard. You have to be patient.

I would read more strategically. I tried to read everything in full, which wasn't necessary or a good use of time. I didn't really find a good rhythm until I started preparing for my exams. I would encourage first-years to spend a little time looking at strategies for exam prep now so that they can adopt some of those best practices for their coursework. It'll make you more efficient now AND will save you time in the future.

I would take better notes for the readings assigned, and I would make more of an effort to speak in class about my own interpretation of the texts instead of trying to say the “right” things (the former, of course, aiding the latter as well).

Go to seminars and/or conferences! I tried at the beginning of my first year... but the work took over. But it's really good for motivation and long-term thinking about what you want to study/where you’d like to work. And you can network even if you’re not totally sure what they were talking about – just be friendly and say you’re a first-year.

Perhaps, I would take classes with a wider variety of professors. I don't regret the classes that I took but now that I am approaching my qualifying exams I realize that I have a small pool of
people that I've worked with in the past which doesn't leave much room for me to decide on who to approach for my committee. I'd also get in the habit of asking for things earlier on. There are tons of resources here that we either don't know about or are afraid to ask for because we think we won't receive them, don't qualify for them etc. I learned that the worst they can say is no and I'm back in the same place I was before.

**Get to know more professors**, not just the ones that were instructing me. I would also have worked on building relationships with older students as they can be a great resource as well as good companions.

I would **simply accept that I'm still learning**, that I don't and don't have to know everything yet, and I'd try to remember that everyone else is in a similar boat. I think there's this assumption that you need to know exactly what you study, who you are as a writer and researcher, and where you're headed right when you arrive. And while it's good to have some sense of a trajectory it can be really counterproductive to cling to one approach or scholarly perspective. Seeing professors and other students as collaborators and allies I think is really important in establishing a healthy relationship to the long game of graduate work.

I would have **stressed out less** if that was possible, but no doubt it was a stressful year. I think maybe if I could have taken the message, "it's all going to be okay, it'll all work out" more to heart, it would have saved me some unnecessary stressing!

Don't forget to **let loose and indulge in the good life**, whatever that might mean to you, whenever it's possible. We do live in LA after all! Try, especially to attend informal social events involving colleagues. It's really important to get to know people in settings where the pressure is low and people are completely themselves, and out of the fluorescent light. If at all possible, try also to find some kind of social life outside of academia. Maintaining variety in your life will really do wonders for your mental health, and prevent total burnout. There’s often a kind of cloistered, even puritanical work obsession among many academics—some will hesitate even to suggest that they have any life outside of work whatsoever. I don’t think you necessarily need to fit that image to succeed, nor should you. As scholars and intellectuals, we need to know the outside world, too.

If, I had to do it again as a first-year, I would have taken **more time to take care of myself and protect my time for myself**. During your first year, you’re extremely motivated and you may have a tendency to take on too much. Remember that graduate school is an endurance test, not a sprint to the finish line. It’s very easy to burn out quickly, if you don't have self-care activities to give yourself a break in between projects. You will also experience a lot of rejection throughout graduate school, so taking time to invest in your health and well-being will protect you from burnout and discouragement and help you become hardier in the long run.

I would **prioritize leisure time more**. Work is important, but so are the other aspects of your life.
If I could do one thing over again as a first-year is to **schedule “free time” for myself**. Sometimes, I would attempt to work long hours including over the weekend but in the end, it would end up being detrimental for me. I obviously would end up taking breaks and feeling guilty about it afterward. Now I realize that it is impossible to work such long hours every day without giving your mind a respite. I would go back and tell myself to schedule time for freedom without guilt.

As a grad student, it is easy to fall into the trap of focusing only on your work and neglecting to be involved in your family and community. Although you should devote the majority of your time to achieving your professional goals, it is important not to focus exclusively on yourself. **Find time to help your family out and give time to charity work** in your community.