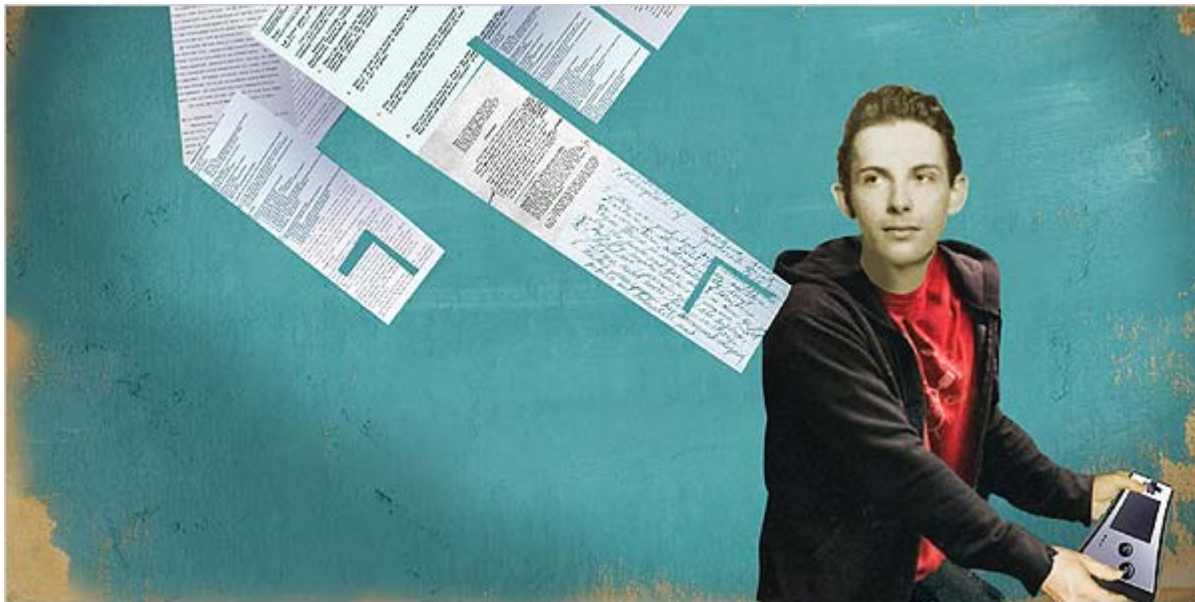




GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

The Big Dilly-Dally

Next Art



Ellen Weinstein

By MICHELLE SLATALLA
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THERE are many reasons to read this, so it would be wrong to assume you are simply avoiding doing something else, something more productive like, say, writing a 20-page paper or studying for an exam.

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If you are in college, however, there's a good chance you are now or soon will be avoiding an assignment. If that's the case, right about now you might be starting to feel a familiar sinking sensation in the pit of your stomach. Call it

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guilt, call it the seeds of panic; that nasty, clammy feeling is actually your friend, because it will eventually motivate you to stop dawdling with the newspaper.



The question is how soon.

If, like Shannon Rothan, you have four papers and four exams in the same week, one hopes you are not still here in Paragraph 4, instead of responding to the queasy feeling by rummaging for those Shakespeare notes you misplaced last month.

But if you are, take hope from Ms. Rothan's story. A junior at [Ohio State University](#), she describes herself as being a "big procrastinator." Make that a reformed procrastinator.

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"With so many papers and so many tests, I used to have so much weight on my shoulders, I would be so stressed out, I would be getting sick, not eating right, not sleeping, not having time to breathe," Ms. Rothan said in an interview during a recent finals week. "But instead, I got eight hours of sleep last night. I'm going to the grocery store this afternoon. And I don't feel like biting anyone's head off."

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What changed Ms. Rothan's outlook? She asked herself the questions below.

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1. Slacker, Staller, Shilly-Shallyer. This You?

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Most of us procrastinate at one time or another, because it's hard to get started. Notice, for example, how you're 27 words into reading answer No. 1 and I still haven't started to answer the question. My dawdling is a classic example of academic procrastination — the behavior that 75 percent of students engage in, according to Joseph R. Ferrari, a psychology professor at [DePaul University](#) in Chicago who has spent years studying procrastination. Avoiding a specific, looming assignment, though, is not necessarily a symptom of chronic procrastination. The good news is that the chronic procrastinator, the person who postpones everything in life (shows up late to work, makes great excuses for belated birthday cards, blows deadlines large and small) has a bigger problem than the academic procrastinator, whose main problem is getting started on assignments or studying ahead of time for tests. "A chronic procrastinator? That's a lifestyle," says Dr. Ferrari. "But an academic procrastinator is situation specific. It's easier to deal with."



INSIDE 1

Academic procrastinators race to class with uncombed hair, clutching a 20-page paper still warm from the printer. Or worse, they miss the deadline and bring nothing to class but an excuse, says Dr. Ferrari, co-editor of "Procrastination and Task Avoidance: Theory, Research and Treatment."

How big a problem is your tendency toward academic procrastination? Measure it at all.successcenter.ohio-state.edu/quizzes.asp. Developed by Bruce W. Tuckman, a professor of education at Ohio State, the quiz is called “That’s Me, That’s Not Me.” Answering the 20 questions helps Dr. Tuckman’s students assess their inclination to procrastinate. For instance, the quiz asks students to consider the accuracy of statements like “I wish I could find an easy way to get myself moving” and “I look for a loophole or shortcut to get through a tough task.” The more you recognize yourself in statements like these, the more likely you are to be a classic academic procrastinator.

2. So What? You Get It All Done in the End.

“The No. 1 rationalization procrastinators use is, ‘I work better under pressure,’ and we teach them that there’s one word that’s not right in that statement, and it’s ‘better,’ ” Dr. Tuckman says. “It’s not that you work better, it’s that you work only under pressure.” In other words, you can pass all your classes with better grades. “To motivate yourself to do this, you need to create the feeling of pressure that motivates you earlier in the process, not the night before the paper is due,” he says.

3. So What's Causing You to Postpone Working?

Probably it’s one of two things. Dr. Ferrari’s research shows there are two basic types of habitual procrastinators, which he describes as “arousal” and “avoidant” procrastinators. Arousal procrastinators are thrill seekers, who get a rush from leaving something until the very last minute and then working like a whirlwind to complete the task. Avoidant procrastinators are insecure; they shirk because they fear failure. Other researchers see similar patterns. “One of the main reasons for procrastination is self-doubt,” says Kelly H. Ahuna, who oversees the “Methods of Inquiry” course at the University of Buffalo’s Graduate School of Education.

4. What's the Cure?

Courses like Dr. Ahuna’s, which teach critical thinking and give students the skills to tackle assignments and juggle academic responsibilities, are becoming widely available at campus learning centers. In Dr. Tuckman’s class at Ohio State, “Individual Learning and Motivation: Strategies for Success in College,” you can learn concrete strategies for motivating yourself.

“Some students don’t believe they can do it,” Dr. Ahuna says. “And some students don’t value what they’re doing. Very often they are in the wrong major. We identify and work on

those factors, almost like a checklist. If you find you can't bring yourself to open the textbook, what is the problem? Do you not see the worth in that course? Should you be changing your major?"

Both Dr. Ahuna and Dr. Tuckman compare students' grade point averages before and after taking a study skills course. "And the course works," Dr. Tuckman says. "When we match their G.P.A.'s from the term in which they took the course against their prior academics, G.P.A.'s improve."

Why? Because in classes that teach study habits, students learn to "forget the forest and instead look at each tree," Dr. Ferrari says. "When you see a whole big project, you think, 'Oh, my God, it's not due for 15 weeks, so I'll think about that tomorrow.' Instead, no, everything can be broken down. Let's just cut down one tree at a time."

5. O.K., But How Exactly?

Ms. Rothan took Dr. Tuckman's course when she was a sophomore at Ohio State. There she learned that when she gets an assignment, she must make an immediate plan for how to tackle it. "I make a to-do list every day," she says. "I know what's coming. A few weeks before a 20-page paper is due, I write in my planner, 'Make an outline,' because that's nice and easy. I do it and I'm done." On the next day, she tells herself to "Write intro." The next day, "Write conclusion."

The key, researchers agree, is to break down assignments into small, manageable increments that require no more than an hour of work on any given day.

"The idea is to specifically identify the tasks," Dr. Ahuna says. For instance, instead of telling yourself to "study for an hour," assign yourself specific, quantifiable tasks, along the lines of "Read Chapters 1 to 4."

6. Fine, But What If These Techniques Don't Work?

For one in five students, they won't, Dr. Ferrari warns. "They're chronic procrastinators, not just academic procrastinators. To say to a chronic procrastinator to 'just do it' is like saying to a clinically depressed person 'just cheer up.'" In these cases, recognize your limits. Confide in your parents and seek professional counseling.

"But, parents, don't do the work for them," Dr. Ferrari says. "Always be supportive, but my Italian grandmother had an expression: 'Some people will not get off the beach until the

water hits their behind.' Sometimes a kid has to learn there are consequences, so we've got to let the water hit their behinds."

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
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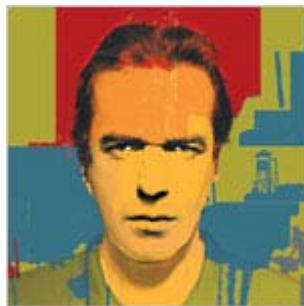
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