

# Learning to plan in four steps

A well-prepared and executed schedule can be a great way for you to use your time smarter and thus achieve better results or feel better about your studies.

One of the main goals of making a schedule is to get an overview. And if you have an overview, that creates more peace of mind and gives you more self-confidence. That's a gain.

Additional advantages of making a schedule are:

- You learn to estimate what needs to be done in the coming period (= learn to estimate expectations)
- You learn what the block roughly will be about (= distinguish between main and secondary issues)
- You learn what you need to do on each day (= learn to estimate the difficulty of the material and how much effort you will need to put in)
- You will learn more about yourself: do you overestimate yourself or do you underestimate the material? Do you underestimate yourself or do you overestimate the material? Do you spend too many or too few hours studying? Is it events or just thoughts that keep you from sticking to your schedule? What do you prioritise when you get stuck?
- Reduce concentration/discipline problems

These are skills and strategies that you can use later on in your career, whichever path you choose. However, your schedule has to fit like a glove, otherwise, you won't stick to it. Which makes sense. Keep reading to find out how you can make a schedule that fits like a glove.

There are four steps to making a good plan:

**Step 1. Schedule activities**

**Step 2. Estimate and schedule the course material**

**Step 3. Schedule revision, buffers and practice exams**

**Step 4. Keep to your plan and monitor your progress**

**Step 1. Schedule activities**

Start by scheduling fun activities.

- a. Work out how much time you have until the exam (e.g. six weeks).
- b. Use a sheet of A4 (landscape) for each week. Divide that up into seven days, with three blocks for each day. It's best to do this on the computer, then you don't have to keep erasing things if (part of) the schedule falls apart and you have to adjust it. You could also print out the corresponding Weekly Schedule worksheet.
- c. Identify which weekends/evenings/days/hours are for personal things (sports, jobs, parties, friends, relationships, outings, hobbies). Put these in your schedule first.
- d. Make sure that you have at least one day off from your studies per week and that you have time to relax.

Once you have done that, you can start scheduling the compulsory/essential educational components.

- e. Schedule your seminars and tutorials, project meetings, lectures, practicals, internships and other educational components.

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## Step 2. Estimate and schedule the course material

- Your brain can concentrate well for an average of 20-45 minutes at a stretch. Then it really needs to process all the input (find connections and associations) first. Determine how many minutes in a row you can study effectively: this is then the duration of one study block. For example: one study block = half an hour.
- Gather all the reading and study material. Determine how many pages you think you can study per study block (in this example: half an hour). If you really have no idea, just study for half an hour and see how much you can get done.
- Based on your estimation, or trying it out, calculate how many study blocks you will need to get through the material. If you have to learn 100 pages of Book A and you get through 10 pages of that book in half an hour, then you will need 10 study blocks for that book. Go through this process for all your reading and study material. For example, you'll end up with a total of 46 half-hour study blocks. Number them: block 1 through to 46.
- Schedule these study blocks in a logical way. If blocks 4 to 10 are a preparation for the practical session on Tuesday, then you should schedule those on the Monday or even earlier.

## Step 3. Schedule revision, buffers and practice exams

- Schedule one hour or 90 minutes of revision time every week: if you don't revise, you won't create strong circuits in your brain! If you 'don't have time' to revise, adjust your schedule or set priorities.
- Schedule two hours of buffer time each week. This gives you room to flexibly adjust your schedule during the week itself. And if you have planned well, this time will end up being free time. Saturdays are usually a good time for this.
- Halfway through your schedule, plan to do half of the practice exams. By doing these and evaluating the results properly, you will know whether you are on the right track.
- In the final days before the exam, schedule the second half of the practice tests to check that you have a good command of the material.
- The day before the exam, schedule some time to relax or do a bit of revision (don't study new material!). If that's possible, of course – some timetables continue right up to the day before the exam. Which is annoying, but you will just have to deal with that.

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## Intermediate step: a critical review of your plan

Review your schedule critically and ask yourself the following questions:

- Is your schedule **realistic**? Have you considered travel time (e.g. three hours a day on the train)?
- Is the schedule **feasible**? If you know that you don't study well after eight o'clock in the evening, don't plan to do any study activities after eight o'clock.
- Is the schedule **balanced**? Are the days equally 'hard'/'easy'? Are the days varied enough? If your schedule includes days that you are already not looking forward to, your chance of success will be lower. This doesn't mean your days shouldn't be busy or difficult. It also doesn't mean you have to enjoy all the things you have planned. It does mean, however, that it's a good idea to distribute the more difficult things as equally as possible over the weeks. Don't just put off doing them!

If necessary, adjust your schedule to make it feasible and achievable. This may mean that you have to drop a few personal activities to make room for study.

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## Step 4. Keep to your plan and monitor your progress

If part of your schedule doesn't work out, make a note of that in the schedule. At the end of the week, take a look at these notes. Can you see patterns in **time**: Is it mainly on Wednesdays? Or the evenings? Can you see patterns in **subject**: Which subject is always the first to bite the dust? Can you see patterns in **reason**: Was it because friends came to visit? Tiredness? Lack of motivation? Or are you not taking it seriously enough?

Other things that may come to light include:

- Your schedule is too optimistic (you think you can get more done in a week than you actually can)
- You notice that you don't actually get round to starting (procrastination)
- You notice that you have an aversion to commitments

Evaluating your schedule like this is important. The more you know what's going on, the more you can do something about it. Adjusting your schedule based on self-knowledge and experience will result in better and better planning – and all of the advantages that come with it, such as a better overview, peace of mind, and being able to make a better estimate of your abilities and the material. And a well-organised and smart schedule will help you to combine your studies with sports, family, friends or extra (fun) study projects.

## Finally: Know yourself

You have self-knowledge when you can determine when you need help. Self-knowledge doesn't mean that you can do everything yourself. If you lack discipline, make sure you make an appointment with someone who is very disciplined, for example. Or make a schedule with your academic counsellor and regularly review together how things are going.