How to Procrastinate and Still Get Things Done

By John Perry

I have been intending to write this essay for months. Why am I finally doing it? Because I finally found some uncommitted time? Wrong. I have papers to grade, a grant proposal to review, drafts of dissertations to read.

I am working on this essay as a way of not doing all of those things. This is the essence of what I call structured procrastination, an amazing strategy I have discovered that converts procrastinators into effective human beings, respected and admired for all that they can accomplish and the good use they make of time.

All procrastinators put off things they have to do. Structured procrastination is the art of making this bad trait work for you. The key idea is that procrastinating does not mean doing absolutely nothing. Procrastinators seldom do absolutely nothing; they do marginally useful things, such as gardening or sharpening pencils or making a diagram of how they will reorganize their files when they find the time. Why does the procrastinator do these things? Because accomplishing these tasks is a way of not doing something more important.

If all the procrastinator had left to do was to sharpen some pencils, no force on earth could get him to do it. However, the procrastinator can be motivated to do difficult, timely, and important tasks, as long as these tasks are a way of not doing something more important.

To make structured procrastination work for you, begin by establishing a hierarchy of the tasks you have to do, in order of importance from the most urgent to the least important. Even though the most-important tasks are on top, you have worthwhile tasks to perform lower on the list. Doing those tasks becomes a way of not doing the things higher on the list. With this sort of appropriate task structure, you can become a useful citizen. Indeed, the procrastinator can even acquire, as I have, a reputation for getting a lot done.

The most perfect situation for structured procrastination that I have encountered occurred when my wife and I served as resident fellows in Soto House, a Stanford University dormitory. In the evening, faced with papers to grade, lectures to prepare, and committee work to do, I would leave our cottage next to the dorm and go over to the lounge and play Ping-Pong with the residents or talk things over with them in their rooms -- or even just sit in the lounge and read the paper. I got a reputation for being a terrific resident fellow, one of the rare profs on campus who spent time with undergraduates and got to know them. What a setup: Play Ping-Pong as a way of not doing more important things, and get a reputation as Mr. Chips.

Procrastinators often follow exactly the wrong tack. They try to minimize their commit-

ments, assuming that if they have only a few things to do, they will quit procrastinating and get them done. But this approach ignores the basic nature of the procrastinator and destroys his most important source of motivation. The few tasks on his list will be, by definition, the most important. And the only way to avoid doing them will be to do nothing. This is the way to become a couch potato, not an effective human being.

At this point you may be asking, "How about the important tasks at the top of the list?" Admittedly, they pose a potential problem.

The second step in the art of structured procrastination is to pick the right sorts of projects for the top of the list. The ideal projects have two characteristics -- they seem to have clear deadlines (but really don't), and they seem awfully important (but really aren't). Luckily, life abounds with such tasks. At universities, the vast majority of tasks fall into those two categories, and I'm sure the same is true for most other institutions.

Take, for example, the item at the top of my list right now -- finishing an essay for a volume on the philosophy of language. It was supposed to be done 11 months ago. I have accomplished an enormous number of important things as a way of not working on it. A couple of months ago, nagged by guilt, I wrote a letter to the editor saying how sorry I was to be so late and expressing my good intentions to get to work. Writing the letter was, of course, a way of not working on the article. It turned out that I really wasn't much further behind schedule than anyone else. And how important is this article, anyway? Not so important that at some point something that I view as more important won't come along. Then I'll get to work on it.

Let me describe how I handled a familiar situation last summer. The book-order forms for a class scheduled for fall were overdue by early June. By July, it was easy to consider this an important task with a pressing deadline. (For procrastinators, deadlines start to press a week or two after they pass.) I got almost daily reminders from the department secretary; students sometimes asked me what we would be reading; and the unfilled order form sat right in the middle of my desk for weeks. This task was near the top of my list; it bothered me -- and motivated me to do other useful, but superficially less important, things. In fact, I knew that the bookstore was already plenty busy with forms filed by non-procrastinators. I knew that I could submit mine in midsummer and things would be fine. I just needed to order popular books from efficient publishers. I accepted another, apparently more important, task in early August, and my psyche finally felt comfortable about filling out the order form as a way of not doing this new task.

At this point, the observant reader may feel that structured procrastination requires a certain amount of self-deception, since one is, in effect, constantly perpetrating a pyramid scheme on oneself. Exactly. One needs to be able to recognize and commit oneself to tasks with inflated importance and unreal deadlines, while making oneself feel that they are important and urgent. This clears the way to accomplish several apparently less urgent, but eminently achievable, tasks. And virtually all procrastinators also have excellent skills at self-deception -- so what could be more noble than using one character flaw to offset the effects of another?

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