

Studying with a Plan

Information on Learning and Time Management

Methods, tips and techniques for
successful distance learning - right from the start 😊

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Studying with a Plan

Preface

In order to support you from the beginning of your studies, we have compiled some methods, tips and techniques for learning and time management. As surveys of students in continuing education programmes have shown, the greatest challenges in part-time studies are not so much in the subject matter, but rather in balancing studies, family and work.

The basic methods and techniques of learning and time management were developed in the course of the 20th century and have lost none of their relevance since then. On the contrary: in the age of digital transformation and the accompanying requirement to process more and more information in less and less time, they are more than ever a helpful tool for reconciling the constantly growing demands with personal work-life balance. Diana Hunt and Pam Hait already described this area of tension in 1992 in their book "Das Tao der Zeit. Erfolgreiches Zeitmanagement" (The Tao of Time. Successful Time Management): *"On the one hand, the impersonal age of information is heading straight for space, a highly mechanised lane driven by the collective scientific mind and monitored by computers. The Age of Information, empowered by its technology, is a fast lane of data, events and experiences connected worldwide. In contrast, the Age of Consciousness runs on a parallel path, but returns to itself as it winds towards infinite space. The Age of Consciousness is distinctly personal, a highly emotive world in which individuals look within themselves and realign their personal power to create their own life experience from day to day."* (Hunt & Hait, 1992, p50. Note: re-translated from the German version.)

Reflecting on one's own actions combined with becoming aware of individual goals and priorities forms an important basis for successfully balancing studies, career and family in the long run. This is exactly where the present methods and techniques of learning and time management come in. We wish you a profitable reading and would be pleased if the information helps you to reconcile your distance learning with your everyday obligations in order to successfully complete your studies with joy, motivation and sufficient perseverance.

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Studying with a Plan

Content

- Setting goals with the SMART method..... S. 4
- Ten basic rules for a successful time management..... S. 5
- Setting priorities with the ABC Analysis and the Eisenhower Principle..... S. 6
- The ALPEN Method for optimising daily time and work management..... S. 8
- Organising the learning workload / My learning plan..... S. 9
- The SQ3R Method for effective reading..... S.14
- Bibliography..... S.16

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Setting goals with the SMART Method¹⁾

The first step for successful learning and time management is **to define your own goals**. They form the guideline for looking at what is important and the basis for setting priorities sensibly. The way you set your personal and professional goals has a decisive influence on whether and how you achieve your goals. Effective goal setting therefore forms the basis for your success.

With the **SMART Method** you define your goals with the help of clear criteria. The name of the method stands for the abbreviation of the five SMART criteria according to which each of your goals should be aligned:

Specific = define goals precisely and unambiguously

Measurable = set intermediate and sub-goals, the achievement of the goals must be objectively recognisable

Attractive = formulate goals positively, the target state should be desirable

Relevant = the goals set should be self-influenceable, achievable, but at the same time also demanding

Time bound = the time for achieving the goal should be clearly defined

Goals set according to the SMART Method help you **to focus your time and energy on the essential things** and **to set the right priorities**.

¹⁾ Information given refers to the German site <https://karrierebibel.de/smart-methode/> (last accessed August 9th, 2021); information in English can be found e.g. on <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/smart-goals.htm> (last accessed August 9th, 2021).

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Ten basic rules for a successful time management²⁾

- 1) Be aware of the unique and fleeting value of your time!
- 2) Use a book to write down goals and schedules!
- 3) Follow the principle of writing!
- 4) Set priorities according to the ABC Method!
- 5) Control the causes of time pressure, stress and working overtime!
- 6) Protect yourself from disruptions, time thieves and over-planning!
- 7) Delegate as well and as much as possible and use the recycle bin!
- 8) Always concentrate on what is most important!
- 9) Consider the purpose of your life and set long-term goals!
- 10) Spend more time on the essentials, such as family and recreation!

²⁾ Information given refers to Seiwert, Lothar J. (2005): Mehr Zeit für das Wesentliche. Besseres Zeitmanagement mit der Seiwert-Methode, 10th ed., mvg. Comparable tips on time management in English can be found on the internet.

Setting priorities with the ABC Analysis and the Eisenhower Principle (1/2)

The actual use of time often does not correspond to the value of the activity. Successful time management is closely related to aligning your activities with your goals and assigning clear priorities to daily tasks and obligations along your goals.

Here, it is helpful to form a ranking order with the help of the **ABC Analysis**³⁾

A-Tasks = the most important tasks that are of greatest value for the fulfilment of the targeted objectives. According to the rule of thumb of ABC Analysis, A-Tasks usually contribute about 65 percent to the overall result, but only make up about 15 percent of all tasks. Consequently, **it is important to focus on A-Tasks and to prioritise them.**

B-Tasks = important tasks that should be done in person if possible, but do not have to be done immediately. According to the rule of thumb of ABC Analysis, B-Tasks usually account for a share of about 20 percent and they also contribute about 20 percent to the overall result. **B-Tasks should therefore be firmly established and scheduled in medium-term work planning.**

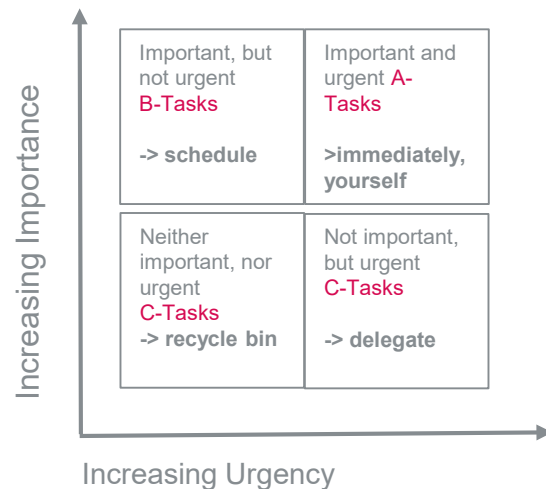
C-Tasks = tasks with the least value for the fulfilment of the set goals, but often with the greatest share of time. According to the rule of thumb of ABC Analysis, category C accounts for about 65 percent of all tasks, but it contributes only 15 percent to the overall result. Since they often seem urgent but do not necessarily need to be done personally, **you should delegate them in favour of A- and B-Tasks if possible or sort them out as far as possible.**

3) Information given refers to Seiwert, Lothar J.(2014): Das 1x1 des Zeitmanagement. Zeiteinteilung, Selbstbestimmung, Lebensbalance, vgl. S. 39 ff.; 36th rev. ed, Gräfe und Unzer. Comparable tips on the ABC Analysis in English can be found on the internet.

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Setting priorities with the ABC Analysis and the Eisenhower Principle (2/2)⁴⁾

By using the **Eisenhower Principle**, which helps to sort tasks according to importance and urgency, it is easier to set priorities and achieve the desired goals. The Eisenhower Principle goes back to the American general of the same name and later US President Dwight D. Eisenhower and is used to prioritise tasks clearly and quickly. The basis is the classification of upcoming tasks into the dimensions "**important**" and "**urgent**". The result is a matrix with four fields:



The Eisenhower Principle helps to avoid the so-called "urgency trap", which leads to getting bogged down in daily tasks and to being absorbed by tasks that seem urgent but are less important considering the goals that have been set.

Especially when we are faced with difficult tasks that we do not like to deal with because they are exhausting or we feel overwhelmed when dealing with them, and which we would therefore prefer to avoid, there is a danger of distracting ourselves with unimportant tasks and putting off the important tasks more and more.

4) Cf. ibid.: p. 71

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The ALPEN Method for optimising daily time and work management⁵⁾

With the **ALPEN Method** you can optimise your own way of working, sharpen your awareness of the time you actually use and counteract the so-called "procrastination". Ideally, you need no more than fifteen minutes a day to do this. A-L-P-E-N is an acronym and stands for five German terms of set activities:

A - Aufgaben aufschreiben (writing down all Activities, tasks, meetings etc.)

All pending tasks are compiled in the form of a simple to-do-list without consideration of the order for the next day. Ideally, this should be done one day in advance. If something could not be done the day before, it is added here.

L - Länge einschätzen (estimating Length of time needed)

The second step is to estimate the expected time span for each task. It is important that the time needed is estimated realistically and not too tightly, that a time limit is set and that deadlines with exact times are noted.

P - Pufferzeit einplanen (Planning buffer times)

In order to protect oneself from over-scheduling (i.e. taking on too many tasks in too short a time), it is advisable to use the following approximate values when planning activities: 60 % of the time can generally be concretely "planned", while 40 % of the time should serve as a time buffer for unexpected disruptions and spontaneous activities.

E - Entscheidungen treffen (Establishing prioritised decisions)

The most important task in this work step is to set priorities with the help of the ABC Analysis and the Eisenhower Principle, i.e. the consistent focus on A-tasks and the ranking of tasks according to importance and urgency.

N - Nachkontrollieren (Noting down level of success)

With the follow-up control, not only the control of the individual activities takes place, but also the control of the planning. In this way, experience is gained to realistically assess the time needed for your tasks and the awareness and the joy about what has already been achieved grows.

⁵⁾ cf. *ibid.*: p. 34. The ALPEN Method was developed by the German economist Prof. L. Seiwert. Comparable tips on this method in English can be found on the internet.

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Organising the learning workload / My learning plan (1/4)⁶⁾⁷⁾

Sensible, well structured planning can make learning much easier and simpler. It helps to avoid learning blockades and to make small manageable piles out of unmanageable mountains of tasks. Planning your learning also helps you to become aware of priorities and to set them at the beginning of the day.

1. Use your personal performance curve

We are subject to individual performance highs and lows during the course of the day. You can determine your own individual performance by carefully observing yourself for a few days and systematically evaluate these observations. During the performance highs, you should tackle the most important and complicated tasks. The performance lows, on the other hand, are suitable for light routine activities.

2. Take a break

Your memory needs breaks in order to be able to handle the learned content. Studies have shown that the memory curve - and thus also the entire performance curve - can only be maintained continuously at a high level if the learning periods are interrupted by breaks. This is linked to the construction of our memory: Each conscious phase of learning is followed by a phase of unconscious processing, while the brain continues to work, the learned content is being stored. If too much information follows one another too closely, they interfere with each other. Recovery breaks therefore help to process learning material and give body and mind the opportunity to regenerate. Because if the natural rhythms are constantly ignored, exhaustion increases steadily and failures become more frequent.

6) Stichel-Wolf, Christine, Wolf, Joachim (2013). Wissenschaftliches Arbeiten und Lerntechniken: Erfolgreich studieren – gewusst wie! 7th, rev. ed., Springer Gabler.

7) Rost, Friedrich (2017). Lern- und Arbeitstechniken für das Studium. 8th compl. rev. ed., Springer.

Studying with a Plan

Organising the learning workload / My learning plan (2/4)

If this happens all the time, body and mind are constantly overstrained, and performance will also decline in the long run. The ideal time for a break is when concentration is declining, but the performance low has not yet been reached.

3. Bring variety into your learning plan

If information differs only very little from each other, there is a danger of confusing and mixing them up. They get out of focus, blur and interfere with each other's storage. Learning blockades occur as a result of similarity inhibitions. Thus, if possible, two or more languages with common features should not be learned directly one after the other. However, the risk of a learning blockade is lower if parts of the learning material are already well mastered.

4. Limit your learning time

If possible, intensive learning work should not exceed 6 hours (mere learning work without breaks), because after that the balance between learning effort to learning success deteriorates significantly.

Organising the learning workload / My learning plan (3/4)

5. Set sub-goals

Learning projects in their entirety often feel like running a marathon, which hardly seems manageable when you think of the entire distance. However, if you focus your attention on single sections of the route and decide to master the next section, you will experience continuous success by mastering parts of the route. The same also applies to learning projects. If you divide higher-level goals into small, achievable intermediate goals you will allow yourself small achievements and at the same time prepare for the success of the entire learning project. It is useful to set goals for each learning unit (of 1 - 2 hrs) and check at the end of the unit whether you have achieved them.

The goals should be defined by using the **SMART Method** (see page 4). It is important to ensure that they neither under- nor over-challenge. It is useful to consciously congratulate oneself for the achievement of sub-goals and to reward oneself for the achievement of higher-level goals. In doing so, you strengthen your positive self-perception and promote your motivation.

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Organising the learning workload / My learning plan (4/4)

Day + Time (from until)	Subject	Topic	My Learning Goals	Goal Achieved?
			<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	
			<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	

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The SQ3R Method for effective reading (1/3)

The **SQ3R Method** refers to a method developed by Francis P. Robinson for effective, active or comprehending reading.⁸⁾ The objective is to understand the text in depth and to be able to remember it in the long term. The name SQ3R is an abbreviation for the names of the five phases that are passed through in this reading technique: **Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review**.

Phase 1: Survey

The first phase aims to introduce the text to the reader. Instead of jumping straight into the text, the first step is to get an overview - for example, by looking at the blurb, the table of contents, the index and the author's biography. Headings, structure and keywords catch the eye and an initial context as well as the overall framework can be made out. In this way, not only the structure of the text becomes clearer, but also the professional language in which it is written. Themes and key points become apparent. It is advisable to skim through the text and read the headings. If there are summaries at the end of the chapters, read these too before going deeper.

Phase 1 sensitises the brain to absorb the reading material. The brain is made aware of the structure of the text. Initial reading goals can be defined more easily in this way.

8) Robinson, Francis P. (1978): Effective Study. 6th ed., Harper & Row, New York.

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The SQ3R Method for effective reading (2/3)

Phase 2: Question

Now create questions for the text. If you cannot think of any specific questions right away, just ask the “w-questions“ (what, which way, why, what to, who, when, where) or turn the headlines into questions.

With these two steps you have prepared your consciousness. You have thus activated existing knowledge into which the new textual information can be partially embedded. By asking questions carefully and precisely, you sharpen your concentration and attention to work with the text in a focused way. In this way you counteract any distractions and are now ready to receive the following information.

Never skip this step and, if possible, do it in writing! With Phase 2 you focus your attention on the essential issues.

Phase 3: Read

Now look for answers to the previously asked questions in the text during the "actual reading". Now read the chapters or sections you have chosen at the most appropriate pace: depending on your level of prior knowledge, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly - reading new content intensively, skimming familiar content. Mark important passages. Pay particular attention to the questions from Phase 2. Which sentences are crucial? To what extent are important connections presented? On which terms is the focus?

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The SQ3R Method for effective reading (3/3)

Phase 4: Recite

Review the text by writing down the most important points in your own words or recapitulating them in your mind (making them your own). This follow-up helps you to process a text and transfer it into your long-term memory. Particularly helpful are the questions you put to the text at the beginning of the reading. The constant alternation between questions - reading - recapitulating keeps you motivated to read and delays the signs of fatigue. Recapitulate (repeat) after each section/chapter, depending on the density of information and difficulty of the learning content.

Phase 5: Review

The last phase connects the text you have read with your previous knowledge. Go through the text, your questions and the answers you found again. Look for linking points and similarities to content you have dealt with earlier. By summarising the edited text, the whole book or the professional article in a few sentences, you save the content of the text in your long-term memory.

If you want to handle any text routinely in this way, it is important that you internalise the five phases and apply them in a ritualised way. With increasing application, the steps are then carried out automatically and the foundation for effective reading and processing of specialised information is laid.

Studying with a Plan

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