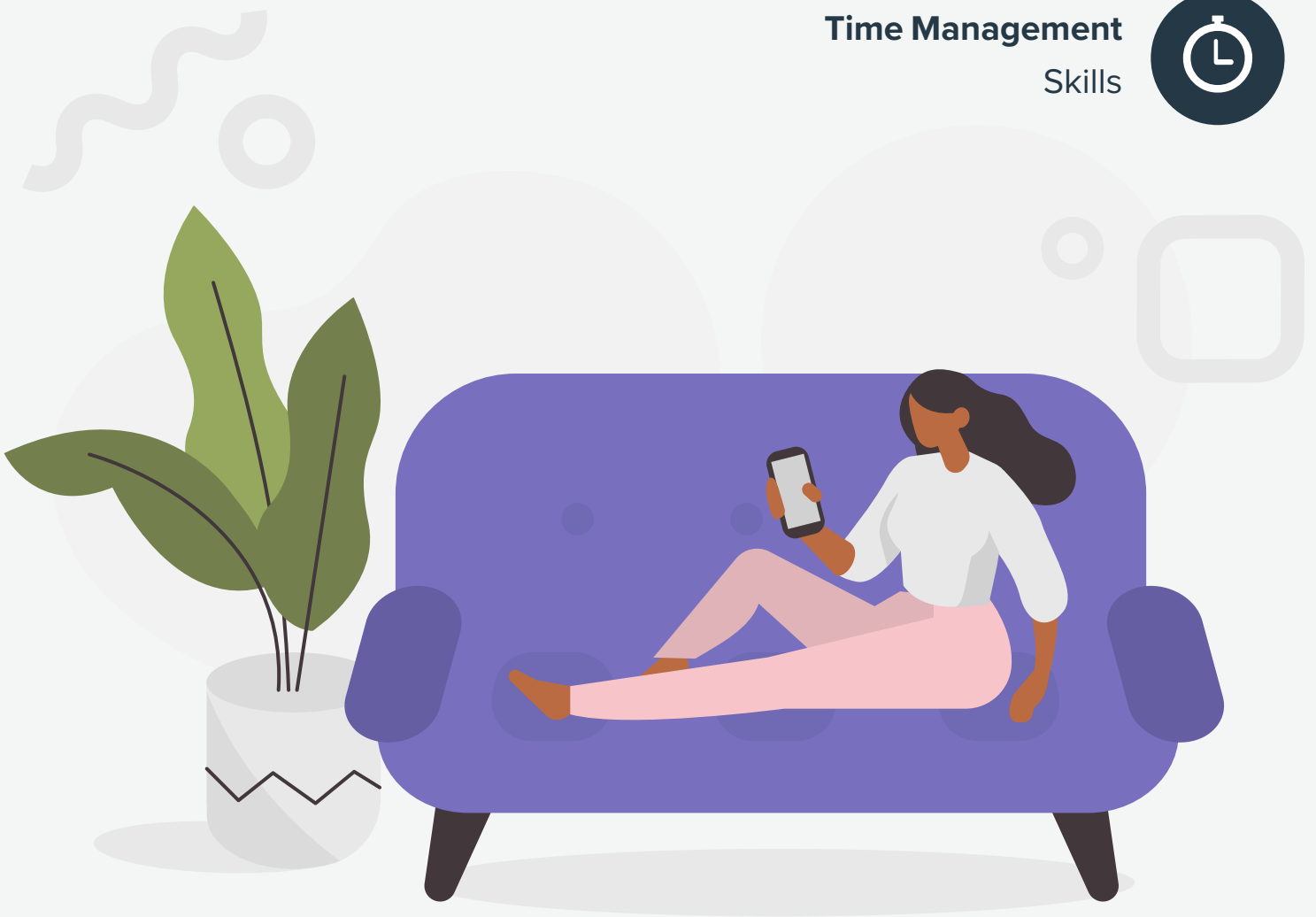


# Skillbook

# Overcoming Procrastination

Time Management  
Skills



**Mindtools**

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## Skillbook

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# Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Signs and Symptoms	2
3.	Planning to Take Action	6
4.	Set the Stage for High-Value Work	8
5.	Key Points	13

# 1. Introduction

**H**ave you “eaten your elephant beetle” today? In other words, have you done that task that you really don’t want to do, but know that you have to do? If you regularly put off tasks like this, you need to admit to yourself that you’re procrastinating.

An elephant beetle is an ornery, ugly critter. No matter how long you look at it, or from which angle you approach it, it’s still ugly. So, isn’t it better to get the nasty thing out of your sight sooner rather than later? Unfortunately, for procrastinators, it’s not as simple as that.

Procrastination is a bad habit, and it feeds on itself – if you procrastinate once and get away with it, it’s much easier to do it again. But procrastination makes you look bad, because you end up rushing through the task, and it makes you feel bad, because putting off important tasks and handing in rushed or lackluster work can damage your self-esteem.

Despite their struggle to get things done, procrastinators are among some of the most creative and visionary of people, so you’re in very good company! Leonardo Da Vinci, Truman Capote, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the Dalai Lama, and Bill Clinton are just some of the more well-known people who put off important tasks. And just as these people produced great work – despite their bad habit – so can you.

This **Skillbook** will help you to get out of the procrastination habit. In under an hour, we’ll look at how you can:

- Recognize the signs and symptoms of procrastination.
- Plan to complete high-value tasks.
- Set the stage for getting work done.

When you focus your attention on **doing** rather than **avoiding**, you’ll be amazed at what you can accomplish. As a result, you will increase your value to your employer, and lower your stress levels.

## 2. Signs and Symptoms

**T**o understand how procrastination impacts your life, you need to be aware of what it looks like, what the emotional repercussions are, and how you got into this pattern of behavior in the first place.

It's important to emphasize that procrastination isn't the same as laziness – a lazy person may procrastinate, and a procrastinator may be lazy, but one doesn't automatically follow to the other. A procrastinator is more likely to be unmotivated or overwhelmed than lazy.

You may be a procrastinator if you say things like:

- I won't be able to get it all done, so why bother?
- I've missed the deadline already, so what's the point of even trying? I'll just take the rap and move on.
- I won't do it well, so I won't do it at all.
- I'm not in the mood right now. I'll do it tomorrow.
- I'll do it once I've got all these little things out of the way.
- There are so many things to do that I don't have a clue where to start.

Do any of these sound familiar?

Once you recognize that you procrastinate, the next step is to understand why you do it, and when.

### The Procrastinator's Toxic Cycle

Often, when a procrastinator is putting off a task, they distract themselves with another activity. This act of busying themselves with an alternative activity feels somewhat satisfying, as they “get something done.” However, the sense of satisfaction is only temporary and it is tempered with guilt at putting off the more pressing task.

When the alternative activity comes to an end, the procrastinator is faced again with the daunting prospect of beginning the original task, and the internal struggle starts once more. They may even berate themselves for not having “just got on with it” in the first place. Then comes panic.

Panic is a familiar emotion to the procrastinator. It is often the only thing that can make them actually start the original task. However, because they have procrastinated, they will have less time and fewer resources to hand. They may turn in a project on time, but it will be rushed and of a low standard. Then, they may blame themselves even more for not having done as good a job as they were capable of.

This toxic cycle becomes a pattern of behavior that can be difficult to break.

## So Why Don't You "Just Get on With It"?

Earlier, we pointed out that it isn't necessarily laziness that causes the procrastinator's toxic cycle. Procrastinators are often highly capable individuals. They are skilled at seeing the "bigger picture," and they produce great ideas as a result. However, most great ideas only come to fruition when a multitude of smaller, contributory actions are achieved first. Whereas some people are adept at organizing and completing all these small tasks, procrastinators tend to become overwhelmed and engage in the procrastinator's toxic cycle.

This is where planning comes in. Planning is the procrastinator's best friend! It allows you to differentiate the important, high-value tasks from those that are just distractions.

This **Skillbook** has exercises that will help you to identify and prioritize the important tasks that you need to complete to achieve your objectives.

When you complete all the exercises, you will have a plan that will allow you to break free from the cycle of procrastination, and you can move forward with increased focus and confidence.

So, let's get started!



### Action:

Think of five things on your work or personal To-Do List that have been there for more than a week. For each item, record the task, the deadline and how long it's been on the list.

Then ask yourself, "What is the consequence of not getting the job done?"

Remember to think of potential consequences, as well as actual ones. Your boss might reprimand you, you might get a bad reputation, your career may suffer, you might miss a great opportunity, or your stress levels might rise. Add these in the fourth column.

Task	Deadline	How Long on List?	Consequence of Not Finishing
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

Now look over your tasks, and the consequences of not completing them:

- Can you identify any common elements or themes?
- Are the tasks that you procrastinate on all related to one particular project, or to a certain aspect of your life?
- Are the consequences of a similar type? (For instance, no real immediate costs, but numerous medium to long-term potential ones.)

## Procrastination and High-Value Areas

Sometimes, we can be so focused on quick wins, and on the things that demand our attention immediately, that we lose sight of the high-value or strategic tasks that contribute to the bigger picture. When that happens, we fail to reach our potential.

Realistically, there may never be enough time in your day to get everything done. So, you need to work on the things that are most important. You simply cannot afford to fritter away your valuable time on low-value tasks – nor can you afford to put strategic projects on hold.



### Action:

To think about your high-value tasks, answer the following questions.

**Which of the tasks that you should be doing are high-value? What tasks will have the greatest impact on your work, life, family, or other group?**

**Which of these high-value tasks or activities can you, and only you, complete?**

**Which of the tasks that you listed in your “Procrastination Table” (on page 3) fit into both of the categories above?**

The tasks that you identified in the final question above are the high-value ones that you should not avoid. When you know what tasks you should really be working on, it becomes harder to justify putting them off.



### Tip:

Schedule time in your diary to come back to this section and analyze your job in more detail, to determine which additional activities add the most value to your work. There are usually three or four areas that make up the bulk of your overall performance, so you should spend time examining this and getting to the core of how to perform efficiently.



### 3. Planning to Take Action

So far, we've looked at high-value tasks in general. Now you have to decide exactly which ones you have been procrastinating over, and make a plan to get them done.

You need to put plans in writing before they have any real credibility. Written goals spur you into action, and they help you to make larger tasks and projects more achievable. When you create a plan, you can break the whole project into manageable pieces that don't seem overwhelming or impossible to complete.

Remember, one of the main reasons why people procrastinate is because they feel overwhelmed, so planning is an important skill that you can use to break big jobs down into a series of small ones, as well as deciding when and how you'll do it.



#### Action:

Use the chart on the next page to begin your action plan:

1. In the first column, list three high-value tasks or projects you will start work on immediately.
2. Set a reasonable deadline for each. When you do this, refer back to the original deadline and see how long it has been on your list. Add these in the "Deadline" column.
3. In the "Activities Required" column, break your task or project into small, bite-sized chunks. This often helps take the "overwhelming" factor out of completing a task, and it can be particularly useful if you think this is a key reason for your procrastination.
4. Finally, for each task or project, prioritize its activities by marking them with a number (with "1" as most important). This lets you decide the order in which you'll complete the activities.

Task	Deadline	Activities Required
1.		
2.		
3.		

Keep a copy of this chart on your desk, where you can see it. Then, first thing every day, refer to it and begin working toward the goals you've set. If you do something each day to move towards your goals, your sense of accomplishment will flourish. This alone is a huge factor in eliminating a procrastination habit.

## 4. Set the Stage for High-Value Work

**A**s we've already mentioned, procrastination is a habit. The best way to get rid of an old habit is to replace it with a new, more positive one. Here are some things you can do to set the stage for highly effective work.

### Clear Your Space

You can't work effectively if your workspace or work environment is in chaos. You need to have a sense of order and control to do your best work. Some people have messy desks much of the time, however when they have a big assignment to complete, they clear everything away and start afresh.

You also can't expect to work efficiently, or with enough concentration, if you don't have all the material, resources and supplies you need to complete the task. How easy is it to step away from a task completely, because you don't have what you need to get started? Equally, when you have to go to get something in the middle of a task, it's a surefire opportunity to put it on the "back burner" once again.



#### Action:

Answer the following questions to think about the state of your workspace.

**What does your desk or workspace look like right now?**

**What materials and supplies do you need to have on hand to work on your high-priority tasks?**

**List five things you can do today that will bring order and organization to your workspace.**

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**4.**

**5.**

## Motivate Yourself

Low motivation is a classic precursor to procrastination. When you lack drive and energy, it's hard to get anything done, let alone do the things that are challenging or unpleasant.

And when you do begin to work smarter and procrastinate less, not everyone will notice. You will need to be your own cheerleader. When you recognize – and celebrate – your achievements, you will motivate yourself to carry on getting things done.

There are two elements to motivation that you need to think about here – your inner dialogue and external rewards.

### 1. Your Inner Dialogue

The messages that you give yourself are very important. They can motivate you to keep working, but they can also deflate you and cause you to give up. When you work effectively, and you don't procrastinate, it's essential that you send yourself positive and affirming messages.

#### Action:



Create three positive messages that will boost your spirits and keep your motivation level high. You might want to write these on sticky notes and place them around your workspace.

Positive Messages to Yourself
1.
2.
3.

## 2. Rewarding Yourself

Procrastinators tend to engage in reward-type behavior before they even begin their important tasks. They may decide to look at their favorite web site or enjoy a coffee break as a precursor to their task, but, as we've discussed before, they feel little joy because, deep down, they know that they are procrastinating.

To counter this, plan rewards into your work schedule. Planned rewards will make you work harder to achieve milestones in your project, and they provide the additional benefit of making your task seem less daunting.



### Action:

Look back at your action plan on page 6 for the three high-value tasks or projects that you need to work on. Choose one or two activities per task or project where an external reward would be helpful to keep your motivation level high. (These might be routine or boring activities, or those where there is little chance of outside recognition.)

Then, identify what the reward will be for each activity. Your rewards could include things like lunch in your favorite restaurant, a gourmet coffee, or a shopping trip.

<b>Task/Project 1</b>	
<b>Activity 1.</b>	<b>Reward 1.</b>
<b>Activity 2.</b>	<b>Reward 2.</b>
<b>Task/Project 2</b>	
<b>Activity 1.</b>	<b>Reward 1.</b>
<b>Activity 2.</b>	<b>Reward 2.</b>
<b>Task/Project 3</b>	
<b>Activity 1.</b>	<b>Reward 1.</b>
<b>Activity 2.</b>	<b>Reward 2.</b>

## Create Urgency

Many of the low priority tasks that you spend your time on get your attention because they are perceived as urgent. So, you need to create a sense of urgency about the tasks that you tend to put off. This urgency triggers a high-performance mindset.

There are no rules for how to create urgency. Some people repeat short phrases like, “Do it, do it, do it.” Others set rigorous mini-deadlines for themselves: they break each task into smaller parts, and they won’t take a break after they finish each task but, instead, will take a break after they have completed a series of tasks. This helps a procrastinator to maintain focus and to keep up momentum.



### Action:

Take some time to create your own urgency phrase or statement, and write it in the table below.

Then, break down one of your tasks into mini-actions with deadlines. When you start to work through this plan, note whether you find this approach useful. If you do, create mini-plans for your other tasks.

Urgency Phrase	
Task	
Activity Breakdown	Deadline
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

## 5. Key Points

**P**rocrastination is something that can severely undermine your career. It leads to ineffectiveness, and it eats away at your sense of personal accomplishment. When you procrastinate, others will also lose trust in your ability to get things done.

Procrastination usually happens when a task makes you feel overwhelmed or unmotivated. So, when you deal with these root issues with tools such as action plans and motivating rewards, you can break free of the procrastination cycle.

When you do this, you can then complete the high-value activities that you need to do to be successful. This is good for your organization, and it gets your career back on track.

