

Why I Taught Myself to Procrastinate



By Adam Grant

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NORMALLY, I would have finished this column weeks ago. But I kept putting it off because my New Year's resolution is to procrastinate more.

I guess I owe you an explanation. Sooner or later.

We think of procrastination as a curse. Over 80 percent of college students are plagued by procrastination, requiring epic all-nighters to finish papers and prepare for tests. Roughly 20 percent of adults report being chronic procrastinators. We can only guess how much higher the estimate would be if more of them got around to filling out the survey.

But while procrastination is a vice for productivity, I've learned — against my natural inclinations — that it's a virtue for creativity.

For years, I believed that anything worth doing was worth doing early. In graduate school I submitted my dissertation two years in advance. In college, I wrote my papers weeks early and finished my thesis four months before the due date. My roommates joked that I had a productive form of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Psychologists have coined a term for my condition: pre-crastination.

Pre-crastination is the urge to start a task immediately and finish it as soon as possible. If you're a serious pre-crastinator, progress is like oxygen and postponement is agony. When a flurry of emails land in your inbox and you don't answer them instantly, you feel as if your life is spinning out of control. When you have a speech to give next month, each day you don't work on it brings a creeping sense of emptiness, like a dementor is sucking the joy from the air around you (look it up — now!).

In college, my idea of a productive day was to start writing at 7 a.m. and not leave my chair until dinnertime. I was chasing "flow," the mental state described by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in which you are so completely absorbed in a task that you lose a sense of time and place. I fell so deeply into that zone of concentration that my roommates once gave a party while I was writing and I didn't even notice.

But procrastinators, as the writer Tim Urban describes it on the blog *Wait But Why*, are at the mercy of an Instant Gratification Monkey who inhabits their brains, constantly asking questions like "Why would we ever use a computer for work when the Internet is sitting right there waiting to be played with?"

If you're a procrastinator, overcoming that monkey can require herculean amounts of willpower. But a pre-crastinator may need equal willpower to *not* work.

A few years ago, though, one of my most creative students, Jihae Shin, questioned my expeditious habits. She told me her most original ideas came to her after she procrastinated. I challenged her to prove it. She got access to a couple of companies, surveyed people on how often they procrastinated, and asked their supervisors to rate their creativity. Procrastinators earned significantly higher creativity scores than pre-crastinators like me.

I wasn't convinced. So Jihae, now a professor at the University of Wisconsin, designed some experiments. She asked people to come up with new business ideas. Some were randomly assigned to start right away. Others were given five minutes to first play Minesweeper or Solitaire. Everyone submitted their ideas, and independent raters rated how original they were. The procrastinators' ideas were 28 percent more creative.

Minesweeper is awesome, but it wasn't the driver of the effect. When people played games before being told about the task, there was no increase in creativity. It was only when they first learned about the task and then put it off that they considered more novel ideas. It turned out that procrastination encouraged divergent thinking.

Our first ideas, after all, are usually our most conventional. My senior thesis in college ended up replicating a bunch of existing ideas instead of introducing new ones. When you procrastinate, you're more likely to let your mind wander. That gives you a better chance of stumbling onto the unusual and spotting unexpected patterns. Nearly a century ago, the psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik found that people had a better memory for incomplete tasks than for complete ones. When we finish a project, we file it away. But when it's in limbo, it stays active in our minds.

Begrudgingly, I acknowledged that procrastination might help with everyday creativity. But monumental achievements are a different story, right?

Wrong. Steve Jobs procrastinated constantly, several of his collaborators have told me. Bill Clinton has been described as a “chronic procrastinator” who waits until the last minute to revise his speeches. Frank Lloyd Wright spent almost a year procrastinating on a commission, to the point that his patron drove out and insisted that he produce a drawing on the spot. It became Fallingwater, his masterpiece. Aaron Sorkin, the screenwriter behind “Steve Jobs” and “The West Wing,” is known to put off writing until the last minute. When Katie Couric asked him about it, he replied, “You call it procrastination, I call it thinking.”

So what if creativity happens not in spite of procrastination, but because of it? I decided to give it a try. The good news is that I am no stranger to self-discipline. So I woke up one morning and wrote a to-do list for procrastinating more. Then I set out to achieve the goal of not making progress toward my goals. It didn’t go excellently.

My first step was to delay creative tasks, starting with this article. I resisted the temptation to sit down and start typing, and instead waited. While procrastinating (i.e., thinking), I remembered an article I had read months earlier on pre-crastination. It dawned on me that I could use my own experiences as a pre-crastinator to set the stage for readers.

Next, I drew some inspiration from George Costanza on “Seinfeld,” who made it a habit to quit on a high note. When I started writing a sentence that felt good, I stopped in the middle of it and walked away. When I returned to writing later that day, I was able to pick up where I had left the trail of thought. Mitch Albom, author of “Tuesdays With Morrie,” uses the same trick. “If you quit in the middle of a sentence, that’s just great,” he told me. “You can’t wait to get back to it the next morning.”

Once I did finish a draft, I put it away for three weeks. When I came back to it, I had enough distance to wonder, “What kind of idiot wrote this garbage?” and rewrote most of it. To my surprise, I had some fresh material at my disposal: During those three weeks, for example, a colleague had mentioned the fact that Mr. Sorkin was an avid procrastinator.

What I discovered was that in every creative project, there are moments that require thinking more laterally and, yes, more slowly. My natural need to finish early was a way of shutting down complicating thoughts that sent me whirling in new directions. I was avoiding the pain of divergent thinking — but I was also missing out on its rewards.

Of course, procrastination can go too far. Jihae randomly assigned a third group of people to wait until the last minute to begin their project. They weren’t as creative either. They had to rush to implement the easiest idea instead of working out a novel one.

To curb that kind of destructive procrastination, science offers some useful guidance. First, imagine yourself failing spectacularly, and the ensuing frenzy of anxiety may jump-start your engine. Second, lower your standards for what counts as progress, and you will be less paralyzed by perfectionism. Carving out small windows of time can help, too: The psychologist Robert Boice helped graduate students overcome writer’s block by teaching them to write for 15 minutes a day. My favorite step is pre-commitment: If you’re passionate about gun control, go to the app stickK and fork over some cash in advance. If you don’t meet your deadline, your money will be donated to the National Rifle Association. The fear of supporting a cause you despise can be a powerful motivator.

But if you’re a procrastinator, next time you’re wallowing in the dark playground of guilt and self-hatred over your failure to start a task, remember that the right kind of procrastination might make you more creative. And if you’re a pre-crastinator like me, it may be worth mastering the discipline of forcing yourself to procrastinate. You can’t be afraid of leaving your work un

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