

TIME MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION IDEAS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

By Jo Doran

There is very little information ‘out there’ for graduate students when it comes to handling the paper work, reading, and writing associated with school. Available time-management books focus on work/office related situations and deal with delegating, memos, holding files, etc. Although we may receive a lot of support from our peers, we carry the responsibility for our own idea production, learning, remembering, application, etc. In other words, we delegate to ourselves.

When I first sat down to figure out what was not working for me, two thoughts kept recurring:

- *As a graduate student, I spend far too much time trying to get ready to read—than actually reading.*
- *I also spend too much time trying to organize my papers, books, and articles—but then cannot always find them.*

If you agree with either of these comments, you may want to consider utilizing some of the following ideas.

Please read this article once, all the way through, to get an idea of the four sections of this text: *School, Reading, Home, and Last Words*.

SCHOOL

YOU WILL NEED TO BEGIN WITH THE FOLLOWING:

- **Three-Ring Binder(s)**
- **File Folders**
- **File Box and Letter Tray**
- **A notebook (See under *Reading*)**
- **Notebook paper for cross-referencing**
- **Application:** We will get to each of these below. For now, begin going through your stacks of papers. Your goal is to divide your papers into four groups:
 - Group #1: those you need now but need to organize
 - Group #2: those you will need to refer to throughout the semester
 - Group #3: those you will not need for at least three months
 - Group #4: those you need to toss

ACTION BINDER(S)—GROUP #1:

- Set up a binder with dividers for daily/weekly readings and assignments. This is your ‘place’ for daily work.
- Some of my peers use one binder for each class. I use a single binder so I have all my reading work with me.
- This means that if I have a class where the professor uses only hard-copy readings, I have a ‘main binder’ where I ‘store’ all of the readings for the semester, but I only carry around the ‘current’ readings.
- You will find that ten minutes here and thirty minutes there will offer you valuable critical-reading time. Therefore, it is good to have this portable binder with you.
- I entitle the dividers in my binder with the same (or similar) names as my computer folders (see below). *

REFERRAL FOLDERS—GROUP #2:

- Depending on your discipline area, you may find that several of your readings (articles, journals, books, etc.) apply to more than one area. You do not want to misplace these articles. In addition, your professor may assign a combination of computer articles, hard-copy articles, and course packs. Again, you want to be able to find these easily. Graduate-school work also requires that you engage in a good deal of outside reading. These can be misplaced all too easily. Therefore, you will need a ‘holding place’ for your on-going study articles: *your referral folders*.
- **Computer:** This is the time to transition into using computer files, if you are not doing it already:
 - Begin by creating Main Folders* on your desktop according to your disciplinary focus. (These are your referral folders.) For example, some of my files are: 106 (class I teach), 420 (class I teach), 680A (summer class), Assignment Survey (project), Book Reviews, CV, Course Descriptions, Disability Readings, Dissertation Schedule, Grief (project), Meaning-Making Articles (project), OWL Usability (project), Teacher Identity (conference paper), and Writing Lab (tutoring).
 - Since several of my projects are inter-related and one article may have information for more than one grouping, all I need to do—when working with computer files—is make another copy of the PDF (or Word doc) and slip it into the appropriate folder.
 - Purdue libraries offer a wealth of online journal sources downloadable in PDF format.
 - Inter-Library Loan also is a great source for online articles, as well as hard copy texts.

- Purdue offers Adobe Acrobat 7 Pro (with Acrobat Distiller), which allows you to mark-up PDFs. Using Distiller, you do not have to print out articles to highlight and mark up the article with critical reading notes.
 - This software program is available free online through Purdue’s software remote.¹
 - Purdue also offers Microsoft Word with Acrobat 7, EndNote 9, Adobe Photoshop, Designer, and Indesign, as well as Macromedia (Dreamweaver) and other software free to use through software remote.
- Begin by setting up folders on your desktop (or in your My Documents section). Create a *Working Folder* in which you will place your main folders. I will use my summer class as an example:
 - Main folder: Rhetoric of Access (680A)
 - Subfolder: Book Review (Here I include reading notes, bio info, etc.)
 - Subfolder: Class Notes (I use *Microsoft Word 2004 for Mac-Word Notebook* view)
 - Subfolder: Disability Articles—Grief (This folder includes PDFs)
 - Subfolder: Reading Notes (I use *Microsoft Word 2004 for Mac-Word Notebook* view)
 - Subfolder: Readings (My professors often hand out a CD of readings)
 - Subfolder: Responses (These are class assignments)
 - Subfolder: Seminar Paper (Here I include articles and notes)
 - Subfolder: Syllabus/Course Policies (Self-explanatory)
- The trick is to create appropriate main- and subfolders and organize these files—daily!
- If you can, invest in a laptop and use it in every class to take notes. (*Microsoft Word 2004 for Macs* offers a *Word Notebook* view that includes multiple tabs.² This makes life so much easier!)
- **Hard Copy:** It is nearly impossible to get away from all hard copy texts. In addition, you may be like me and prefer to make notes on actual paper texts, your professor may like paper handouts, or you may already have stacks of papers you do not want to throw away. Therefore, you will have to develop a *referral folder box* and a cross-reference system:
 - Begin by going through your stacks of papers in Group #2: the papers you need to refer to throughout the semester. As with your computer organization, create subject/name files.
 - *Include the exact same file folder titles as you have on your computer.* (See *Computer* above.)
 - Create a cross referencing system for your hard copy texts. Make this as simple as possible. For example, use two 8 x 10 notebook pages for a ‘shared’ article that applies to two areas: Write the title, author, journal title, volume/issue numbers, date, and name of the shared file on each blank notebook page. Slip each notebook page into the each appropriate file folder. Place the hardcopy article in one of these folders. If the hardcopy text is a book, place it on your bookshelf near your work area.
 - *Use these folders.* For example, when you receive an award or a nice reference letter for subbing, etc., electronic or hardcopy, slip it into the CV folder. Then, when it is time to update your CV, you have all your information in one place.

FILE BOX—GROUP #3:

- This is a regular file box in which you will alphabetically (by title or subject) place any papers, articles, etc. you do not need to refer to immediately. This is probably the type of holding place that you are already using for your papers (unless you are using the stack and pile method). This box can be big enough to hold a lot of paper—if you wish.
- If you do not need to look at a paper or article for at least three months, it belongs in this File Box.
- Using file folders, create folder titles that *mean* something to you, and organize the papers/articles.
- This box may hold large groups of related papers, so you may need to use the folders only as dividers to separate the sections.
- Keep 5-10 blank and empty folders in the front of your file box and a marking pen hooked on the box. These come in handy when you go to file something and you do not have a folder for it. You know the scenario: you are in a hurry, you find the file box, you thumb through it looking for an appropriate section, and there is none—so you slip it in the front, the back, or into another folder, and you never find it again.
- Place the file box where you can access it—without having to clean out the closet!

¹ <https://goremote.ics.purdue.edu/Citrix/MetaFrame/auth/login.aspx>

² <http://www.macworld.com/2004/07/reviews/microsoftoffice2004/>

STARTING OUT—FINISHING UP:

- If you initially need to attack a mountain (small or large) of papers:
 - Try to set aside this chore for when you are watching television or listening to the radio.
 - Allow yourself the ‘luxury’ of taking up a large amount of space.
 - Also, accept the fact that you probably will have interruptions... and unless you have a child or an active pet, be ready and willing to leave the mess—as long as you come back to it!
- At the end of *every day* take five to ten minutes to do the following:
 - Make sure that all ‘now’ papers/articles (Group #1) are in your binder in the appropriate section.
 - Make sure all ‘possibility’ papers are in the appropriate referral folders.
 - Make sure all papers to be filed are actually filed in the file box.

STAYING ORGANIZED—WHILE READING AND WRITING:

- You have settled in to read an article. You have your hot cup of coffee, your pens and pencils, *your notebook*, and you are sitting at your favorite study place. You are on the second page of the article and you remember you forgot to call the dentist. Instead of interrupting yourself at that moment, write it down in your notebook. It will be off your mind but you can take care of it as soon as you are finished reading.
- If you are reading on your computer, keep at least two Word documents open. When you find a section in your reading that applies directly to another class/paper, make note of it. If you remember you forgot to take the trash out, type it out on another Word document.
- When you are finished reading
 - File your school note in the appropriate folder before getting up from your computer.
 - Take your non-school notes and call the dentist, write it in your appointment book, or follow through with whatever method you use for keeping track of these types of things.
 - File your paper notes in the appropriate referral folders.

APPOINTMENT/CALENDAR BOOKS:

- Make sure that you use an appointment book, but—again—make sure it is one that works for you.
- Purdue University Bookstore offers a spiral bound *undated* calendar/planner combo by *Blueline*³, which includes an appointment sheet on one page and a writing page on the facing page. It also has a handy plastic folder and a sufficient number of pages for the semester.
- Begin by pasting at least six months worth of calendar pages (included at the end of this article) into the first pages of your appointment book. If you use *Scotch* brand post-it glue, you can remove the calendars and place them in another planner—when you need to begin another book.
- Preparing for the sixteen-week semester, leave eight (for one page per week) or sixteen (for two pages per week) blank pages after the calendar inserts.
- Once you get your class assignments, syllabi, etc. for the semester, use these pages for the following:
 - Mark each page at the top, using either *Week One* or the actual date (i.e. Aug. 28 – Sept. 1).
 - On the first few lines of the week’s page, write the due dates for your projects, papers, etc.
 - Once this is done, work backwards: Divide each project into workable sections and allocate work to blocks of times within the sixteen weeks.
 - Check this section as you set up your daily pages.
- Because I like a more personalized book, I use a 5 x 7 *Moleskine*⁴ (lined) journal and customize it. This journal has 240 pages, which allows me room to use two pages (or more) per day to keep/take notes, etc.

USE WHAT WORKS FOR YOU:

- Whatever methods you are using now, *if it does not work, do not stick with it*. If it does work, but it needs a bit of help, *now is the time to do it*.
- Use bookcase shelves for organization areas. If your desk is too cluttered, sort through your books, stack them elsewhere within reach (if you will be using them), stack them further out of reach (if you will not be using them often), or box them up (if you will not be using them this school year).

³ <http://www.instawares.com/Blueline-NotePro-Undated-Daily-Planner-7am-830pm-9-14x7-14-Black.REDA29C81.0.7.htm?sessionID=1321A2F1D79C2FA905D90130>

⁴ <http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbnInquiry.asp?z=y&isbn=0765599392&itm=2>

READING

- The following information is a very brief overview of a portion of Adam Robinson's book: *What Smart Students Know*, and even though you probably know all of this already, I am going to 'say' it anyway. Just finishing my first year of PhD work caused me a good deal of panic, regarding reading and taking in information:
- You cannot read all of your assigned reading. You probably have to find this out for yourself, but it is good to have someone else tell you this. Therefore, when you *are* reading:
 1. Consider your *purpose* for reading. Is it for research, finding information, studying for exams, preparing for discussion, etc.?
 2. Begin with the big-picture; read these first: *Title, First and last paragraph, Section headings, Tables, graphs, etc., First and last sentence of each paragraph*
 3. Take note of the main ideas and themes as well as the important concepts and terms
 4. Then, decide if you want (or need) to read more. If you do, read through each paragraph or section using critical reading skills:
 - a) Summarize each paragraph or section.
 - b) What is the author doing in each paragraph/section?
 - c) What are my feelings regarding each paragraph/section?
 5. Next, think about the text holistically and consider the following:
 - a) What is the author asking me to believe?
 - b) What is going on that I should be thinking about, as a teacher, as a tutor, for my dissertation, etc.?
 - c) What has changed/is changing regarding this issue?
 - d) How does this issue relate/apply to my own focus and goals?
 6. End up here:
 - a) After I am sure I understand it, how can I create a 'hook' to remember the main points or link it to my previous reading?
 - b) *Use* the information. If you use it (talk about it with your peers, write about it, use it in a paper, etc.) you *will* remember it.
 - c) It may be helpful here to apply Blooms taxonomy⁵ here (for your own use).

HOME

THE (VERY) BASICS

- **Bills and Miscellaneous:**
 - Purchase a letter tray⁶ and a small stand-up file holder for bills.
 - Open your mail over the wastebasket (or at least a basket/container where you can shred later, if you shred).
 - Write the due date of the bill in the 'place stamp here' area in red letters.
 - On the bill, highlight the due date, the amount due, and the account number. When you go to write the check (or pay online), these important items will stand out. Place the bill in the stand-up file holder.
 - If you have a paper, piece of mail, etc. that you do not want to deal with now—but you should at some date in the near future—place a red dot on the top right, and staple all the pages together—including the envelope. Place the paper in the letter tray. The trick here is to make sure that you go through the box once a week. When you do, and you find the red-dot piece, decide if you want/need to deal with it yet. If not, place another red dot next to the original dot and place it back in the File Box. Once you get three red dots, you have to take care of it.
 - Set up a special place (drawer, file, etc.) for slips you might need later (such as tracking slips from UPS, receipts, etc.). It is a good idea to make this part of your weekly routine—to check this drawer and toss everything you do not need.
- **Filing:**
 - Set up a vertical file folder system. This does not have to be time consuming or expensive.
 - Include such sections as Auto Information, Car Insurance, Income Tax, Pay Stubs, Renter's Insurance, Utilities, etc. Make sure that you file your household papers in these folders!

⁵ <http://www.coun.uvic.ca/learn/program/hndouts/bloom.html>

⁶ http://www.officemax.com/max/solutions/product/thumbnail.jsp?BV_UseBVCookie=yes&expansionOID=-536882578

Label the following—for at least two weeks at a time:

- Apartment: Make note of anything that really needs to be done.
 - Communication/Correspondence (CC): Write down people you have promised to call (your family, etc.) and any email you need to send out.
 - Errands: Self-explanatory
 - Meals: (I need this section; you may not. I actually need to remind myself that I have to prepare food to eat, or I will find that it is 9:00 at night and I have not eaten.)
 - Include a section for Fun/Activity: It is far too easy to focus everything around school and come close to a ‘burn out.’ These are not reminders for social get-togethers as much as they are reminders for me to take a walk, read a fun article, or just get out of the apartment. The *Morton Community Center* (222 North Chauncey, West Lafayette (765) 775-5110) offers sports, craft classes, dance classes, etc. This might be where you can find that necessary outlet.
 - School work: This is what you *really need to do this day*. (I like to use the two-page format here so that I can use the second page to really work out what I need to do and possibly, how it connects with other work.)
- Use the remaining portion of your journal as you want, for example reading resources (bibliographic information you will find in other books), vocabulary, quotations, etc., phone numbers/contact information, important and/or personal notes
 - Regarding the *Moleskine* journals: they open fully for easy writing, each journal includes a ‘pocket’ on the back, inside cover—handy for keeping stray slips of paper, each journal has an attached bookmark and attached elastic that holds the journal closed, and additionally, these journals are lightweight and professional looking.

LAST WORDS

A FEW LAST (BUT IMPORTANT) POINTS:

- Allow yourself to let chores go—but do not let your apartment get to the disaster point. When you are cooking, run water for washing dishes and wash as you are cooking. Allow yourself two weeks (or three at the most) and then tape a note on the inside doorknob to your apartment to ‘tell’ yourself to vacuum.
- Take the dog for a walk every evening, preferably after dinner, or play with the cat. (If you live alone and you do not have a pet, I suggest you get one,⁷ unless you have allergies.)
- Try to get as much work done at school as you can. Even if you do not have a family to take care of, it is healthier if you can relax at home and go to bed early.
- Make friends with your peers: You will be working together throughout four to five stressful years. Talk together, laugh together, and cry together. Support each other and trust one another.
- Develop good, working relationships with your professors. These are the people that invited you to Purdue. They want you to succeed, so give them a chance to help you.

HELPFUL LINKS:

- Here are some additional links you might find helpful:
 - <http://www.qub.ac.uk/faculties/FacultyofLegalSocialandEducationalSciences/GeneralFileUploadFolder/ResearchFiles/> (*Click on Time Management Presentation*)
 - <http://gradschool.about.com/od/survivinggraduateschool/>
 - <http://gradschool.about.com/cs/thesiswriting/a/rchjournal.htm>
 - <http://gradschool.about.com/cs/transitions/a/newgradorg.htm>

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⁷ <http://www.lafayetteanimalaid.org/viewourpets.htm>

References

Robinson, Adam. *What Smart Students Know: Maximum Grades, Optimum Learning, Minimum Time*. New York: Random House. 1993.

Winston, Stephanie. *Stephanie Winston's Best Organizing Tips*. Simon & Schuster: 1994.

| Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | (Month here) |
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