

The Productivity Robbing Myths of Grad School

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I am not sure if there is a best way to be efficient and productive as there are many very different, but positive, ways to work. However, there are some common and universally terrible ways to work. Here are a few things that I hear students say with pride that are actually signs of an inefficient worker.

“I do my best work at the last minute. I thrive under pressure.”

-No. The first draft of everything is terrible, even for the best writer. You may be an extremely good binge writer, but I promise that the work will be better with another draft and some time to consider and change content. Plan your time well. The draft of any project should be completed three days to two weeks before it is due. The remainder of the time can be spent in the real work of writing: editing.

“I am not a detail person. I am an idea person.”

-Ideas that are well-researched, communicated in detail, completely thought out, and effectively implemented are useful. All others tend to be vague dreams that borderline on hallucinations. Everyone is a dreamer, but the truly useful person works hard and uses detail to convert dreams into reality.

“I am a perfectionist.”

-This is not a positive trait. Trying to pursue perfection is a useless activity that is harmful to well-being and productivity. Being conscientious, detail focused, and striving for excellence are laudable characteristics. Perfectionism is maladaptive.

When I hear people tell me that they are a perfectionist, I feel the need to assess further to determine if we simply are defining perfectionism differently or if their behavior is maladaptive. Usually people mean that they are detail focused and striving for excellence with undertones of anxiety. This is typically a good set of characteristics for grad students. But when they mention the need to be perfect,

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then we are into a zone where anxiety may be maladaptive. Seeking excellence is good. Seeking perfection is a neurotic waste of time.

“I edit while I write.”

-This is a guaranteed method of getting nothing finished or severely limiting your productivity. Get all of your ideas out on paper. Only edit when you have completed a document or at least a substantial portion. Editing while writing is slow, makes for choppy prose, reduced flow and creativity, and increases anxiety. People with this habit also tend to be perfectionists and have learned this habit while doing last minute work. Take the time to complete a full draft and then edit.

“I don't want to show this to you until it is ready.”

-I understand this secrecy problem. Some supervisors are extremely judgmental and even hostile to unfinished work. Submitting any work is aversive under these conditions. The best approach is to have students submit work on a timed basis, even if it is raw. The difference between a professional and an amateur writer is deadlines. Working to a deadline is more important than achieving the mythic ideal paper. I also find that when students wait to submit their ideal paper that they are crushed when substantial revisions are to be made. The supervisor can make suggestions, edits, improve the paper and move on without judgment. The goal is to develop a relationship that produces a large amount of scholarly material in an efficient manner. Trust between a student and supervisor is the best way to make this happen. When the secrecy issue is fostered we are teaching grad students to be perfectionists and adding anxiety to their lives.

“I'm a multi-tasker.”

-You are not. You can only attend to one task at a time. Many folks have developed a sophisticated skill set where they actively shift attention from one task to another. You attend to the television for a few minutes and then back to your book—you cannot do both at the same time. That counts for radio or music as well. You can focus on music or focus on your work, not both. What we tend to do is shift attentional focus. If you are listening to music and you know what was playing and enjoyed it, then you are shifting focus. Once you are in an activity where you are shifting focus between two things, then your efficiency is being robbed. There is some evidence that music with a constant beat and no lyrics can actually aid in concentration and focus. Classical music is an example. When I am at my most scattered, I listen to a metronome to help with focus. But no one is truly multitasking, you are rapidly

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shifting attention and reducing efficiency. This is not necessarily bad, but inefficient and needs to be used sparingly.

My wife works from home with the TV on. She says that she likes the noise while she works. However, when I ask her what she is watching on television, she has no idea. She is certainly losing some focus, but not as much as she would if she was at all attending to the TV. I watch television while working only on weekends. I am mostly watching TV, but get a little work done at commercials. Not efficient and focused work, but better than nothing.

White noise can be a better idea than music or TV. White noise can be ideal for folks who like a level of sound to mask the often jarring ambient noise of your real environment such as construction, lawn maintenance, and loud neighbors. There are several white noise generators available online such as <http://mynoise.net/NoiseMachines/whiteNoiseGenerator.php> and <http://simplynoise.com/>. One of my favourite websites and apps is <http://www.coffitivity.com/>. This site plays the ambient noise from a coffee shop. You can even select the type of coffee shop noise from “morning murmur” to “lunchtime lounge” to “university undertones.” This style of white noise is also helpful for the folks who actually prefer to do creative work in coffee shops, but cannot get there. I do not understand how people do this as my attention flits to the homeless guy, the hostile person in a long line, and the sounds of coffee slurpers; nonetheless many people do their creative work in coffee shops. The white noise from coffitivity is associated with a place of creativity, which can put you in the mood to work. The secret of white noise is that there is no content in the noise to draw attention away from your work.

Once I learned the skill of unitasking, I became at least twice as efficient as before. Now I do one thing fully focused until completed and then turn my attention to the next task. Not only is my work completed at a faster pace as a unitasker; I enjoy movies, TV, and music much more. And as an extra bonus, there are not the nagging feelings of guilt that go along with such multitasking.

We all develop work habits and there are many ways to be a productive worker. But as grad students and professors have increased pressures to produce the limits of our work habits are often reached and exceeded. What worked as an undergrad no longer works and now falls under the heading of a maladaptive habit. There is a constant need to hone work habits and remove of the productivity robbing myths and habits from your work.