**Time Management Strategies for Busy TAs**  
*(Full Article)*

Graduate education provides students with the opportunity to develop and hone a host of essential scholarly skills. However, graduate students receive little training in the some of the most important skills of all, the ability to manage their time, get organized and get the work done without losing all their hair.

**Get organized!**  
Being unorganized is a huge time waster. You can spend ridiculous amounts of time searching for papers, files, and notes when you could be doing something more productive. The trick is to find a system that works for you and then stick to it. And it’s never too late to start, so take a look at some of the useful tips below to help salvage your year (and possibly your sanity!).

*Create a filing system.* I personally found this incredibly useful. You never begin to realize how important it is to be able to find something until you’re trying to find some article from third year to reference in your thesis.

*Useful Tip* Don't skimp on file folders or you'll find yourself doubling up and losing track of your most important papers. Maintain separate files for:

- research/thesis ideas
- thesis references (divide each topic into separate files)
- exam material; as you prepare for comps, you’ll accumulate copies of old exams, and study materials
- professional credentials – resume, sample cover letter, research statement etc.
- reprints and professional articles - organized by topic
- life materials (bills, taxes, etc.)
- teaching materials (organized by topic)

**NEW CONTENT! Computer Clutter**

It’s there. You just can’t see it. Computers may look neat on your desktop, but inside they can quickly become an awful mess. To keep more disk space available as well as help things run faster try these tips:

**Dealing with Students:**

- Delete e-mail that you’ve already read. This will keep your inbox clean.
- If you open it, deal with it: Reply to e-mail right away, so that your inbox doesn’t build up.
- Create an electronic filing system: If you absolutely cannot reply right away, or need to save an e-mail, place the message in a specialized folder (Ex: Need to Reply, or Archives)
- Watch your sent mail folder. Delete messages from that as well, especially mail with large attachments, such as pictures and .pdf files, which are big space wasters. Make sure to delete anything unnecessary, although if you’re unsure about a message, save it to disk. There’s always something that will come back to haunt you!

**For yourself:**

- Keep a disk or CD with your assignments from previous classes. This will keep your “My Documents” folder easier to navigate. In addition, you will have things backed up in case of failure.
Tools for success: calendars, priorities and rewards

*Year Calendar.* Let’s face it: most of the time you’re thinking of the immediate deadlines, which means you’re probably not focusing on what needs to be done in 6 months. Long term deadlines for financial aid, conference submissions, and grant proposals creep up quickly! Make sure you add all of your long term deadlines to this calendar, as well as self-imposed deadlines to ensure their completion.

*Week Calendar.* This is the most conventional type of academic planner, and it is most useful for day-to-day appointments and deadlines. Be sure to carry this calendar everywhere – it won’t help you when you leave it at home!

*Use a To-Do List*  
Your daily to-do list will keep you moving towards your goals on a daily basis. Take 10 minutes every night and make a to-do list for the next day. Look over your calendar for the next couple of weeks to remember tasks that need to be planned in advance: searching for references for essays, blocking off time to study or grade lab reports, preparing submissions for conferences and grants in addition to all your regular life stuff like grocery shopping, birthday parties and date nights.

*Useful Tip*  
Prioritize your to-do list. Take the "big-picture" approach. Look over what you need to complete and decide what's most important. Try ranking each item by importance and work on your list accordingly so that you don't waste time on nonessential tasks.

**NEW CONTENT!** Break large assignments and tasks into their component parts. If they still seem too large, break them down again. Do this until you have listed everything that you have to do, and until tasks will take no more than 1 - 2 hours to complete.

Try this: Choose ONE item on your list. That is going to be your “major” goal.

Now, take that “major” goal, and break it down into smaller, bite-sized pieces. Those will be your mini-goals. You're now going to achieve each of your mini-goals one by one, until each one is completed. Once the final one is completed, you will have accomplished your major goal.

For example, break a term paper into many smaller and more manageable tasks such as finding a topic, finding articles and books, reading and taking notes, writing an outline, writing the first draft, and revising. Make a list of all tasks required to complete a major assignment. You’ll find that crossing items off of the list feels really good – it makes large assignments feel way less intimidating.

Set goals and deadlines for yourself. For example, set realistic deadlines for each stage of a major assignment. The key word here is realistic. Don’t make unrealistic deadlines if you can’t achieve them; it can be extremely detrimental to your work if a deadline passes you by.

Designate Rewards: In order to really get motivated, designate a reward for each goal you achieve on time. It has to be something really enticing, and it can only be given WHEN you reach your goal (no half points!). Your final goal should be the reward that most entices you.

Go with your flow. Think about your peaks and lows. Are you a morning person? Or are you most productive at night? Plan your time accordingly so that you’re tackling the most difficult work at the times when you're at your best.

**NEW CONTENT!** Activity Log
Keeping an Activity Log for several days will help you to understand how you spend your time, and when you perform your best work. The key is that you don’t change your routine so as to ensure accurate results.

Here’s the how to guide: simply write down the things you do as you do them on a template (visit http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/worksheets/ActivityLog.pdf for a sample). Then every time you change activities, whether it’s opening the mail, working, making coffee, gossiping with friends or whatever, make sure you jot down the time.

As well as recording activities, note how you feel, whether alert, flat, tired, energetic, etc. Do this periodically throughout the day.

The results from the activity log will help to determine when you are the most productive and when you’re wasting time:

- Schedule your most challenging tasks for the times of day when your energy is highest. That way your work will be better and it should take you less time.
- Try to minimize the number of times a day you switch between types of task. For example, read and reply to e-mails in blocks once in the morning and once in the afternoon only.
- Reduce the amount of time spent on personal activities such as making coffee, watching television or surfing the net.

*Useful Tip* Schedule time to work on your assignments and research each day, even if it is just a few 20 minute blocks. This way the material will stay fresh in your mind, enabling you to reflect on it at unexpected times (like on your ride to school or walk to the library).

Make use of wasted time. Have you ever noticed how much time you spend commuting, standing in lines, and waiting (for doctors, advisors, etc.)? Carry pocket work to make use of that time that would otherwise be wasted. Carry a short reading assignment or flash cards for studying. Or use the time to write in your planner and organize yourself. Ten minutes here, fifteen minutes there, it all adds up.

Be flexible. There will always be interruptions and distractions, no matter how carefully you plan. Just remember to allow time for them. Plan a maximum of 50% of your time so that you’ll have the flexibility to handle unexpected interruptions.

Say "No." Sometimes we take on too much. Whether it's hanging out with a friend, taking an extra course, or joining a team, consider how important each is to you and whether you can seriously afford the time before agreeing.

Say “Yes.” Alternately, sometimes you need to schedule time for the important people and activities in your life. The trick is to avoid feeling guilty for watching television, going out for dinner or having a few drinks. Use these activities as your reward for using the rest of your time constructively.

**Procrastination**

Of course this is all well and good provided you actually work when you’re supposed to.

Unfortunately, we all know that this is not always the case. Many people suffer from procrastination and it can thoroughly derail even the most dedicated of workaholics.

*Signs of Procrastination*

- Feeling overwhelmed by the task (“I don’t know where to start”)
- Waiting for the “right” mood or the “right” time to tackle the important task at hand;
✓ A fear of failure or success;
✓ Underdeveloped decision making skills;
✓ Poor organizational skills; and
✓ Perfectionism ("I don't have the right skills or resources to do this perfectly now, so I won't do it at all")

So what can you do to prevail? Try some of these tricks:

✓ The reward system: Give yourself a snack, a short break or even a night out once you've completed a certain task. For me this was one of the most effective techniques to ensure I stayed on track and got the work done on time.
✓ Peer pressure: Ask someone else to check up on you. This is surprisingly effective, and can even be paired with a negative response if you haven't fulfilled your work. I knew a girl whose sister cashed increasingly large cheques each time she didn't have a thesis chapter completed on time.
✓ Take a pay cut: Work out the financial cost of your time wasting. If you're not getting your grading done, think about how much you get paid an hour and how that gets reduced for each wasted hour (complete your grading in one hour = $34. Take two hours and all of the sudden you're down to $16 an hour). This might shame you into working!
✓ Create an action plan: Break the project into a set of smaller, more manageable tasks.
✓ Start small: Begin with quick, small tasks if you can, even if these aren't the logical first actions. You'll feel that you're achieving things, and so perhaps the whole project won't be so overwhelming after all.
✓ The guilt trip: Identify the unpleasant consequences of NOT doing a task and how much it will affect your timetable. This one won't work for everyone, and may actually make the problem worse, so be aware.

If procrastination isn’t so much your problem as boredom, tiredness or lack of energy, it’s possible that you just need to switch things up. Try one of these work alternatives:

✓ Work standing up
✓ Turn the lights up
✓ Change the scenery: move to an unfamiliar office or area such as the library
✓ Shift activities to something more physical and then return to your work. Try going for a brisk walk or play a sport (take a swim, do some jumping jacks). Even a short burst of activity can be enough to boost your energy
✓ Joe’s Tips: I chew gum or drink hot liquids to keep myself interested and awake.

No matter what techniques work for you, every graduate students needs to have some kind of time management plan. If you’re struggling with an overload of papers, you never see your friends and you feel like you’re treading water on your own work, then you might need to reevaluate how you’ve organized your time and space.

References:
About.com:
http://gradschool.about.com/od/survivinggraduateschool/Surviving_and_Succeeding_in_Graduate_School.htm