

Excerpt from

“The Procrastination Doom Loop—and How to Break It”

by Derek Thompson

1 Productive people sometimes confuse the difference between reasonable delay and true procrastination. The former can be useful (“I’ll respond to this email when I have more time to write it”). The latter is, by definition, self-defeating (“I should respond to this email right now, and I have time, and my fingers are on the keys, and the Internet connection is perfectly strong, and nobody is asking me to do anything else, but I just . . . don’t . . . *feel* like it.”).

2 When scientists have studied procrastination, they’ve typically focused on how people are miserable at weighing costs and benefits across time. For example, everybody recognizes, in the abstract, that it’s important to go to the dentist every few months. The pain is upfront and obvious—dental work is torture—and the rewards of cleaner teeth are often remote, so we allow the appointment to slip through our minds and off our calendars. Across several categories including dieting, saving money, and sending important emails, we constantly choose short and small rewards (whose benefits are dubious, but immediate) over longer and larger payouts (whose benefits are obvious, but distant).

3 In the last few years, however, scientists have begun to think that procrastination might have less to do with time than emotion. Procrastination “really has nothing to do with time-management,” Joseph Ferrari, a professor of psychology at DePaul University, told *Psychological Science*. “To tell the chronic procrastinator to *just do it* would be like saying to a clinically depressed person, *cheer up*.”

4 Instead, Ferrari and others think procrastination happens for two basic reasons: (1) We delay action because we feel like we’re in the wrong mood to complete a task, and (2) We assume that our mood will change in the near future. See if you recognize any of these excuses. . . .

- If I take a nap now, I’ll have more focus later.
- If I eat this cake now, that’ll be my cheat for the month, and I’ll have more willpower.
- If I send a few Tweets now, my fingers will be used to typing sentences, which will make this article easier to write.
- If I watch TV now, I’ll feel relaxed and more likely to call the doctor’s office tomorrow morning.

5 This approach isn’t merely self-defeating. It also creates a procrastination doom loop. Putting off an important task makes us feel anxious, guilty, and even ashamed, Eric

Jaffe wrote. Anxiety, guilt, and shame make us less likely to have the emotional and cognitive energy to be productive. That makes us even less likely to begin the task, in the first place. Which makes us feel guilty. Which makes us less productive. And around we go.

6 One thing that can cut through the doom loop is the inescapable pressure of an impending deadline. So what's the best way to design deadlines to make us more productive?

7 People often schedule reminders to complete a project significantly before the deadline, so they have time to complete it. But this strategy often backfires. Some practiced procrastinators are both "present-biased" (they choose ESPN.com or *BuzzFeed* over work every time) and overconfident about their ability to remember important tasks, according to a new paper by Keith M. Marzilli Ericson. As a result, they often put off assignments, only to forget about it until long after the deadline. Procrastination and forgetfulness are bad, independently. Together, they're a double-headed meteor hammer smashing your productivity to tiny little bits.

8 To hack your way to productivity, you could schedule one-shot reminders as late as possible—even slightly *after* you were supposed to start the project. Not only will the last-second reminder and looming deadline break the doom loop and shock you into action, but also it won't give you time to put off—and, potentially, forget about—the task.

9 For pathological procrastinators, recognizing that we need deadlines to bind ourselves to our responsibilities is the first step. The second step is recognizing that our own deadlines are less effective than other people's deadlines.

10 In one famous experiment, Dan Ariely hired 60 students to proofread three passages. One group got a weekly deadline for each passage, a second group got one deadline for all three readings, and the third group chose their own deadlines. Readers were rewarded for the errors they found and penalized a dollar for each day they were late. Group II performed the worst. The group with external deadlines performed the best. "People strategically try to curb [procrastination] by using costly self-imposed deadlines," Ariely and his co-author Klaus Wertenbroch concluded, "and [they] are not always as effective as some external deadlines."

Excerpt from "The Procrastination Doom Loop—and How to Break It," by Derek Thompson, *The Atlantic*. August 26, 2014.

1. What does the phrase "present-biased" mean as it is used in paragraph 7?
 - A. worried about future events
 - B. hoping one's tasks will go away
 - C. inclined to get into trouble
 - D. preferring to enjoy oneself now

2. What is the main contrast the author develops in paragraphs 2 and 3?
- A. the contrast between procrastination of desirable and undesirable activities
 - B. the contrast between two different methods of measuring amounts of procrastination
 - C. the contrast between the costs of procrastination and its surprising benefits
 - D. the contrast between an older theory about the cause of procrastination and a newer theory
3. How does the author structure paragraphs 4 through 10 to develop the central ideas of the passage?
- A. He first lists several signs of procrastination and then explains what each of them means.
 - B. He first tells how procrastination begins and then explains how it progresses over time.
 - C. He first describes what causes procrastination and then tells how to overcome the problem.
 - D. He first lists the most important things to know about procrastination and then adds the least important.
4. The following item has two parts. Answer Part A and then answer Part B.

Part A

What is the author's point of view regarding procrastinators' future behavior?

- A. He believes that procrastinators are unlikely to change.
- B. He believes that procrastinators can develop new habits.
- C. He believes that more research is needed to find a cure for procrastination.
- D. He believes that humans have inherited a fixed tendency to procrastination.

Part B

Which quotation from the passage **best** supports the correct answer to Part A?

- A. "Some practiced procrastinators are both 'present-biased' (they choose ESPN.com or *BuzzFeed* over work every time) and overconfident about their ability to remember important tasks . . ." (paragraph 7)
- B. "As a result, they often put off assignments, only to forget about it until long after the deadline." (paragraph 7)
- C. "For pathological procrastinators, recognizing that we need deadlines to bind ourselves to our responsibilities is the first step. The second step is recognizing that our own deadlines are less effective than other people's deadlines." (paragraph 9)
- D. "Group III performed the worst. The group with external deadlines performed the best." (paragraph 10)

5. The author describes behavior as “self-defeating” in paragraphs 1 and 5. What does “self-defeating” mean in the context of the passage?
- A. keeping oneself from reaching a goal
 - B. becoming angry over small things
 - C. developing habits that get worse
 - D. losing oneself in idle activities

6. Here is the first sentence of a summary of the passage.

Procrastination is different from the idea of delaying a task for good reasons.

Choose **three** statements that **best** complete the summary of the passage.

- A. “Many people procrastinate their regular dental checkups, even though they know better.”
- B. “Scientists used to think people procrastinated because they did not appreciate future benefits.”
- C. “New research suggests that people procrastinate because of their emotions.”
- D. “An example of making excuses is taking a nap now and expecting to have more focus later.”
- E. “A way to combat procrastination is to use external deadlines rather than internal ones.”
- F. “In a well-known experiment, three groups of students were assigned the same proofreading task.”

7. The following item has two parts. Answer Part A and then answer Part B.

Part A

What is a central idea in paragraphs 6 through 10?

- A. Making an effort to improve one’s memory can reduce procrastination.
- B. Setting deadlines can help a person break the cycle of procrastination.
- C. Giving oneself rewards for accomplishments helps avoid procrastination.
- D. Creating reminders almost guarantees that a person will give up procrastination.

Part B

How does the author develop the correct answer to Part A?

- A. by discussing the results of two studies
- B. by giving examples of inappropriate behavior
- C. by contrasting successful ideas to unsuccessful ones
- D. by demonstrating the incomplete nature of current research