

Productivity, Perfectionism, Procrastination, Parkinson's Law, and the Pomodoro Technique

“It is a commonplace observation that work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion,” C. Northcote Parkinson wrote in his essay published in *The Economist* in 1955.

This observation laid the groundwork for what has come to be known as Parkinson's Law.

Parkinson's Law Explained

In simpler terms, Parkinson's Law states that a task will take however long you let it. If you give yourself until 11:50 to write that essay that's due at midnight... it will take you until 11:50. But when your parents threaten to take away your phone if you aren't in bed by ten, I'm betting you get your essay done hours before midnight.

You still wrote your essay. Chances are, you still wrote it as well as you would have if you had taken those two extra hours. How is this possible? You could no longer allow yourself to work past ten, because something, or someone, motivated you to work faster.

To explain his theory, Parkinson used the comedic analogy of a retired elderly lady taking an entire day to complete the simple tasks of writing and sending a letter. However, I hope you'll agree that our example was much more relatable than his.

Applying Parkinson's Law as a Student

Almost all students struggle with procrastination or perfectionism. Many students struggle with both, especially when a major project deadline looms weeks in the future. The project is a daunting task and needs to be well done. But the due date is so far away... you can take your time on it. You have days to perfect every minute detail.

Personally, the only time I don't struggle with perfectionism or procrastination is when I've already procrastinated until the last possible second. Whether I'm cramming for a test during my free period or finishing up a poster the night before it's due, I manage to make the most out of the little time I have left. The weekend—and the concept of rest—become a distant memory and I become a whirlwind of productivity. I don't have time to make my work perfect—I need to use the little time I have to make it good. And between the highly motivating “deadline energy” and a boost of adrenaline, I usually get it done.

Now, I am not saying that you should leave everything for the last second. Procrastination is a terrible habit that will increase stress levels and hurt your grades. What I am saying is that it's possible to learn something from the crazy productivity you experience when cramming. Because the key to cramming isn't the adrenaline—it's your effort.

Using the Pomodoro Method

It stands to reason that if you're able to tap into some of your “deadline energy,” you will be able to increase your productivity even without a pressing deadline. Unfortunately, it can be very difficult to muster the discipline to give this kind of effort.

The Pomodoro Technique is a simple and effective strategy to defeat procrastination and increase productivity. It involves breaking large tasks into more manageable sections and setting a timer for a period of time called a pomodoro—usually 25 minutes—and dedicating that time to working on a specific task. For as long as your timer is going, your only job is to work on your designated task. After the timer goes off, set another timer for about five minutes and take a short break. Every 3-5 pomodoros, take a longer break.

Even though taking breaks may seem counterintuitive, they will help reset your “deadline” energy so you can focus better on the next pomodoro, ultimately multiplying your efficiency.

Conclusion

Understanding Parkinson’s Law is a key to taking down the monsters of procrastination and perfectionism. Using the Pomodoro Technique is also a handy way to increase your productivity. Because being a productive person is more than something to get you through your school career—it’s a personality trait that will only get more and more important as you progress through life.