

**MANAGE  
YOUR TIME  
& YOUR  
LIFE**

**MIRIAM SALPETER**



## About the Author



**M**iriam Salpeter is a social media strategist, job search coach, speaker, author, and founder of Keppie Careers ([www.keppiecareers.com](http://www.keppiecareers.com)), a consultancy serving businesses and job seekers. Forbes named Miriam's blog a "best career resource" and CNN called her a "top 10 job tweeter you should be following." Top media outlets, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Business Insider*, and others, recognize Miriam as an expert resource for job seekers and entrepreneurs.

Author of *Social Networking for Career Success* (in its second edition) and *Write & Speak Like a Professional in 20 Minutes a Day*, and co-author of *100 Conversations for Career Success* and *Social Networking for Business Success*, Miriam is well known as a go-to expert and consultant regarding job search and social media strategies.

In addition to coaching job seekers and small business owners, Miriam is an in-demand writer, speaker, and trainer for groups and organizations. She authors articles for company blogs and teaches job seekers and employees how to use social media. Miriam also runs "The Smart Business Owner's Social Media Help

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Desk,” an online program to teach business owners how to leverage social media marketing tools. She authors online bios and job search materials for clients at every level of their careers.

With a BA in Honors English from the University of Michigan, Miriam launched her career with a Wall Street firm. She left as a vice president to earn a master’s degree from Columbia University with a focus on career guidance. Miriam headed the Career Action Center at the Rollins School of Public Health of Emory University before launching Keppie Careers. She has been empowering job seekers and small business owners since 2003.

Miriam lives in Atlanta with her husband, Mike, their three boys, two cats, and two rescue dogs. She invites you to connect with her on Twitter @Keppie\_Careers and to touch base via her blog.

## How to Avoid Procrastination

**Y**ou've heard the quotes about procrastination. "Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today." Or, perhaps you adhere to the opposite adage, "Never put off until tomorrow what may be done the day after tomorrow just as well." My high school English teacher, Michael Raftery, notes, "Procrastination is the crab grass in the lawn of life." Ultimately, when it comes to planning your time and your life, the most true quote may be, "A year from now you may wish you had started today." Since no one can predict the future, the best approach should be, "Don't wait. The time will never be just right."

If you're waiting for a "perfect" time to take a big step in your life, whether it's for personal or professional reasons, it's unlikely the time will ever come. It's more likely you'll need to just dive into change and embrace the messy aspects that come with trying to achieve new goals while in the midst of a busy, sometimes chaotic life.

Not surprisingly, just as there are many quotes about procrastination, there are many tips and methods to avoid it. Considering the number of distractions most people have in their lives—including social media, 24-hour news, opportunities to binge-watch an entire television series, not to mention the general distractions of everyday life—if you procrastinate, you’re in good company. The key is to learn how to avoid and overcome it.

Joseph Ferrari, PhD, is a professor of psychology and author of *Still Procrastinating? The No-Regrets Guide to Getting it Done*. In an interview on the American Psychological Association’s website, he explained, “We all put tasks off . . . research has found that 20 percent of U.S. men and women are chronic procrastinators. They delay at home, at work, in school, and in relationships. These 20 percent make procrastination their way of life.” While people with clinical depression or phobias may be more likely to procrastinate, those groups don’t represent 20 percent of the population. Clearly, it’s a major issue that affects many people.

## Why Do People Procrastinate?

Frances Booth, author of *The Distraction Trap: How to Focus in a Digital World*, suggested several reasons why people procrastinate in an article for *Forbes*.

### **You Don’t Really Want to Do the Task**

For example, if you are procrastinating on applying for a job, perhaps you are ambivalent about making a move or you don’t really want a new job, after all. If you’ve been putting off making a call, maybe you don’t actually want to talk to the person you’ve been avoiding.

***It's Too Difficult, Too Easy, or Too Boring***

Maybe you need a more challenging (or simple) task that will encourage you to move forward. If this sounds familiar to you, carefully evaluate the items on your to-do list that have been moving from week to week. Are you bored by the items? How can you make it more interesting and fulfilling to accomplish the goal? If the task is too difficult, what will you need to put in place to allow you to accomplish it?

***It's Too Overwhelming***

This may sound familiar to a lot of people. It's not unusual to procrastinate when the task seems too big or daunting. In this case, the best approach is usually to break down the big task into smaller, more manageable parts. For example, *writing a new resume* sounds like a big job, but *list all your jobs and dates worked* may not be very difficult. Of course, when you break a big task into smaller parts, the result will be a longer list of things to do, but each individual item should be easier to complete than the bigger assignment.

***Fatigue and Needing a Break***

If it's been a long day and you are still trying to plow through your to-do list, it's easy to look for ways to avoid finishing the work. Perhaps it makes better sense to take a well-timed break.

***Fear of Failure or Fear of Success***

Do you sometimes procrastinate on big changes because you're not sure what might happen if you pursue them? If this may contribute to your hesitancy, take some time to weigh the pros and cons of moving forward or not. Make an educated choice about whether or not to pursue the plan.

**Exercise: Why Do You Procrastinate?**

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself why you procrastinate? Maybe now is a good time! Think about the last time you delayed working on a project or handling a deadline. Why did you wait until the last minute, or put off starting to work? Do you believe you work best under stress? Do you really not have time to get things done, so the result is delaying the inevitable? Evaluate your motivations. Write down reasons why you procrastinate. Later in the chapter, another exercise will suggest you identify ways to overcome those reasons.

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## Risks Procrastinators Take

Do you feel as if you're always working without any breaks? Are you spending so many of your work hours procrastinating and not getting anything done that you never have downtime? This is one risk of spending time checking email or social media, staring out into space, or daydreaming instead of working. It's possible to feel like you've spent the entire day "working," when, in fact, you've procrastinated away all of that time with no end product to show for your efforts.

Constant procrastinators also suffer a lot of stress, according to Ferrari. Worrying about how to get the work done can add a lot of extra pressure, which may wear down the immune system and make procrastinators more likely to get sick. Procrastination can compromise health (because people put off or delay sleep, exercise, or eating well). Procrastinators may put themselves at financial risk by failing to pay bills on time. Other dangerous things to procrastinate about include car or home maintenance, not paying taxes, or failing to renew professional licenses. Relationships also suffer when people procrastinate too much. While a belated birthday card may not end a friendship, if you constantly bring work home because you can't get it done in the office, you may have a difficult time maintaining friendships or family time.

## How to Break the Procrastination Cycle

Researchers believe procrastinating is not a simple time management problem, even though time management techniques can be helpful to address the issue. If you are afraid of failure (or success), or simply paralyzed and unable to move forward with your goals, you'll want to reach out for counseling or specific advice to help overcome the bigger issue that may be holding you back from



getting ahead. Do not underestimate the ways in which your fears may prevent you from achieving your goals.

If you procrastinate primarily because you need help managing your time, these tips and tricks may help overcome the problem.

### **Set a Deadline**

Give yourself a deadline. Have you seen the quote, “A goal without a deadline is just a dream?” If you don’t hold yourself accountable to a timeframe, whether it’s a long-term goal or something you need to accomplish right away, it’s unlikely you’ll ever achieve anything. As noted in Chapter 8, it’s best to create a detailed timeline and break up large projects into manageable pieces, each with deadlines.

Jacqui Barrett Poindexter, Chief Career Writer at *Career Trend*, explains how she uses deadlines and a desktop task timer to power through her writing tasks:

*I work for an hour straight (and only an hour), with a very specific production goal in mind. I whoosh through it to completion, with the caveat that I can edit and clean it up afterward. It’s amazing how well we perform and think (and the quality of our work) when we have time/production constraints.*

### **Break Big Projects Down**

Just as your lists include categories and sub-categories, break down your projects and plans into smaller chunks to help avoid feeling overwhelmed and discourage procrastination.

A contact of mine mentioned great advice a realtor gave her about packing up her home to ready it for sale. She had tried to de-clutter it many times, but it was a big job due to the amount of things she accumulated in 15 years. She recounted:

*I must have looked like I was going to throw up when she told me I needed to de-clutter and pack up all of our personal*

*belongings. She told me to pack two boxes per night to make it more manageable. In no time, I finished several closets, plus all but two bookcases. We've thrown out or donated about three-dozen bags and boxes of things. It's brilliant to break it down into an ongoing, manageable project.*

### **Be Accountable**

Tell people about your goals, and find an “accountability buddy” who will help encourage you to move forward with your goals. Just as people are more likely to exercise if a trainer or friend is expecting them at the gym, you’ll be more likely to follow through if you tell someone your plans and that person can check in with you to ask about your progress. This can be a friend or family member, but many people choose to hire a coach, instead. If you ask your friend or partner to keep you accountable, the check-ins may feel more like nagging and prevent forward progress. If you don’t want to hire someone to help and don’t want to rely on a friend or family member, search for accountability groups or mastermind programs. These can be online chats or in-person groups of people, all trying to accomplish their individual goals. You don’t need to be in the same field as someone else to help them with accountability. All you need to do is understand their timeline and have a general sense of what’s required to achieve their goals. Similarly, a mentor may also be able to help you stay accountable, if he or she is willing to step into an active, regular mentoring role.

Social media can help you stay accountable. Instead of turning to Facebook or other online tools to continue to procrastinate and avoid your work, announce a plan online and ask your community to check in with you to track your progress. Dieters sometimes do this successfully. Some people announce their plans to become sober or to quit smoking and request help from their online communities. As long as your plan is public, you may want to say, “I’m planning to finish writing my novel by the end of next month. Please check in with me to help me stay on track, and you’ll be the

first to read it.” Or, “I’m making a long-term plan to earn a certification in meeting planning. It’s going to take a lot of advance planning, but my personal deadline is one year from now. Please keep me on track by asking about my progress.”

Find and meet people who already accomplished what you want to do. These people can take mentor roles or simply provide a bit of advice to inspire you. It’s a good idea to spend time with people who are action oriented and focused. Research shows spending time with strong-willed people can actually improve your self-control. A study in *Psychological Science* says people who have low self-control can improve their discipline by spending time with people who have the desirable traits. Surround yourself with people who inspire you to take action, and you’ll be more likely to accomplish your plans.

### **Eliminate Obstacles**

Look around—Is your workspace itself a huge distraction? You’re setting yourself up to fail if you don’t tailor your environment to help ensure you are as successful as possible. If you can’t get work done at home, find somewhere else to work. Go to a coffee shop or find office space elsewhere so you won’t be distracted by anything.

If you can’t get any work done in your office because there are so many distractions, identify ways to steal some private time. Either work in an office with a closed door (if there is one), or tell people you have a specific deadline you must reach and ask for no interruptions during a certain period of time during the day. If you have to tape a sign to your back asking no one to interrupt you, do it!

Is one of your obstacles overthinking the problem? Try not to overcomplicate the situation. Keep in mind, “The perfect is the enemy of the good.” In other words, if you never do anything unless it is perfect, you’re unlikely to even accomplish something good. Do not procrastinate because it’s not the perfect scenario.

Just as you should try to eliminate the psychological reasons you may be delaying your work, do everything in your power to avoid any physical weaknesses. For example, if you can’t help but check your phone every time it buzzes, put the phone elsewhere so you won’t be distracted every few minutes.

Susan Pogorzelski, author of *Gold in the Days of Summer* and an International Book Award Finalist, suggests using the Freedom app. She explains:

*Freedom is my favorite app when I’m writing—  
it blocks websites like Facebook and Twitter so  
I’m less compelled to hit refresh immediately to review  
my social media streams after every sentence I write.*

Take advantage of technology and use an app to cut down on temptation. Disable any sounds or notifications on your computer that may distract you from your work, and consider shutting down programs you can easily check (such as email) so you won’t be tempted to use them when you should be productive.

## USE TECHNOLOGY TO AVOID DISTRACTIONS

If you like the idea of being “locked out” of distractions, Amy Spencer offered several additional suggestions in *Time* magazine. In addition to Freedom (macfreedom.com), which disables your Internet for an allotted amount of time, RescueTime (rescuetime.com) charts your online time and provides a clear picture of how you are spending (or wasting) your time. LeechBlock (addons.mozilla.org) works with Firefox so you can block certain sites for periods you choose.

### **Exercise: Choose an App**

Review these apps or others your friends recommend. Use one for a week. Do you notice a difference in your productivity?

Perhaps tapping into some of the productivity methods described in Chapter 9 will help keep you moving toward your goal. For example, use the Pomodoro Method or time boxing. Writer and marketing consultant Corey-Jan Albert explains how she gets work done:

*I follow the 20-minute rule. That is, I commit to work on the project without distraction for 20 minutes. By the time 20 minutes have passed, I'm usually on enough of a roll that I can make significant progress or finish the task.*

### **Tap Into Your Motivations**

What really motivates you and helps you get things done? Is there a reward (beyond simply finishing a big or small task) that might encourage you to finish what's on your list? Do you need to break things down into manageable tasks to even begin to accomplish what's on your list?

Educator and writer Kathy Mathews motivates herself by breaking down tasks and including rewards. She explains:

*If I write it on a list, I will do it. But if it's something I hate doing, I break it down and include a reward. For example, rather than write, "Pay bills," (which would take a lot of steps and result in one check mark), I expand my list to include all of the smaller steps. For example: "Open all bill envelopes," "Recycle inserts and envelopes," "Organize bills by dates due," "Schedule payments online," and "Enter payments in Quicken." My reward is five check marks on my list and 25 minutes playing on Facebook.*

Whether or not you created a vision board, as recommended in Chapter 8, decide if visualizing yourself accomplishing your goals may inspire you. Close your eyes and picture yourself in a clean office space, or heading up the department at work. Can you psych yourself into being excited about taking the steps needed to accomplish those goals?

Hunter College student Corrina Blau successfully "tricks" herself into avoiding procrastination. She explains:

*I used to plan my all-nighters about a week in advance. Working at 3 a.m. is great for finishing a long paper, but bad for waking up to go to class the next morning. So, I chose a block of time that was convenient and pretended I had already procrastinated for weeks and felt the stress of having to deliver a finished product in a few hours. Then, I was super productive and finished the project (or most of it) and could enjoy the rest of the time before the actual deadline, feeling like a boss.*

Do you like to win? Incorporate a gaming strategy into your goal setting. If you have an unexciting project, create a game of getting it done. Plan to get a certain amount done in 10 or 20 minutes and see

if you can beat the clock. If you get into a groove, you could get a lot done in less time than you might have expected.

You may not need to try to trick yourself into being stressed or play a game to motivate yourself. John Youngblood, a small business owner, entrepreneur, and proud bearded collie owner, explains:

*I fully embrace procrastination as one of my many delightful personality quirks. That said, when there is something unpleasant that has to be done, I will connect it to something very pleasant. For instance, in order for me to prepare my tasty pasta dinner tonight, I must first do the dishes that I decided to leave in the sink last night. That works for me.*

Another tip to help tap into your personal motivations is to either choose to start with the most or least exciting part of the project first. If you're really dreading one aspect of an assignment and you're procrastinating because you don't want to do something, promise yourself a reward and get the worst part done. Then, you'll be free to move ahead on the rest of the work. On the other hand, if you're really excited about a particular part, but are procrastinating because of the piece you don't want to do, go ahead and finish the fun part and then convince yourself the boring or difficult part isn't so bad, after all, since you'd rather finish it than have it hanging over your head.

### **Reward Yourself**

Reward yourself for big and small accomplishments. You may plan to buy yourself a treat or take that long needed run or walk once you get something checked off your list. If you need to raise the stakes, consider depriving yourself of something you really want to do if you don't meet a certain milestone. For example, if you don't finish a particular task, you won't attend a friend's party. If necessary, plan a series of rewards to motivate you to reach your goals.

**Exercise: Determine Methods to Overcome Procrastination**

If you completed the exercise to help determine why you procrastinate, it should be easier to help yourself overcome the problem. List which of the techniques in this chapter you plan to incorporate to help you get your work done faster.

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## Just Do It!

Sometimes, all the games and tricks and rewards aren't enough and you need to buckle down and do the work. On a personal note, I'd like to give some insight into how I wrote this chapter, as it may help inspire procrastinators. This is the last chapter in several books I've written over the past few months, and I've been striving to get to this point for some time. With many obligations, I did not move quickly toward my goal of finishing, and the deadline was coming quickly. Since I normally submit work ahead of schedule, not being close to finished was stressful. However, with a firm deadline, I moved through the last chapters and amusedly remembered the last chapter planned was about procrastination. Recognizing I should take my own advice, I implemented several of the tips to finish this chapter in record time.

First, I turned to my online friends and community for accountability and assistance. I posted on Facebook that I planned to finish this chapter and I gave myself a firm deadline for when I expected to have it done.

I asked for help. The quotes in this chapter come from people connected to me from almost every sphere in my life, including high school teachers, a niece, and friends and colleagues I met more recently. Having their insights to share helped make this chapter the most fun to write, and the words came more quickly.

When I was tempted to delve into other projects or to review email, I reminded myself to avoid distractions, or I wouldn't achieve my stated goal. The double reward of being able to thank everyone and announce I finished the chapter (and the book) hung over me and motivated each new paragraph.

Finally, I relocated myself to my office, worked in uninterrupted quiet, and put aside other obligations in order to finish this one.

I hope these tips and insights, which helped me finish a big project, motivates and inspires you to do the same and to accomplish your big goals.

My colleague, Camille Roberts, CEO of CC Career Services and a federal career consultant, congratulated me on finishing this chapter and commented:

*When it comes to making changes in your life, you have to want it more than anything. Procrastinating only delays what you deserved all along.*

### In Summary: Action Tips

Procrastination will prevent you from accomplishing your life and work goals. That's a great reason to overcome it. Consider incorporating these tips into your plans to help ensure you get your work done and make forward progress on your plans.

- Decide why you procrastinate and recognize the risks of continuing in that cycle.
- Adapt new strategies to help you get your work done.
- Set a deadline.
- Break down big projects into smaller, more manageable pieces.
- Find an accountability partner to keep you on track.
- Avoid obstacles that tend to delay you from your work.
- Use technology, whether as basic as a timer or as sophisticated as an app to track your time.
- Identify your motivations. Should you compete with someone and make getting the work done a game? What rewards would help encourage you to work harder?
- Put the right combination of things in place and just do it!

## REVIEWING YOUR PROGRESS REGULARLY

*Plans to address mistakes:*

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*Suggestions of people who may be able to help:*

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### **Implement Changes**

The benefit of assessing and re-assessing your progress and identifying obstacles in your way is to help you make changes and plan differently the next time. When you are aware of what you need to do differently to accomplish your goals, you can move forward confidently, knowing you will be able to do better next time.

### **In Summary: Action Tips**

When you make yourself accountable for your plans, you'll make a point to review your progress, and assess and make changes.

- Evaluate your work, and if you participate in a company-sanctioned review process, prepare for it.
- Keep records, review your checklists, and prepare for constructive criticism.

## REVIEWING YOUR PROGRESS REGULARLY

- Conduct your own review, and identify any inefficiencies that affect you.
- Review your goals, and seek help if necessary if you are not meeting them.
- Make changes you believe will help propel you in the right direction, and start again on the path to accomplishing what you hope to do.

