



Time Management for College-Bound Students

An Essential Guide to Less Stress, More Time, and Achieving Goals

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High school is a hectic time for students. Classes, study time, a part-time job, extra curricular groups, sports, social time, and family time combine to make every day a whirlwind of activity. Is it any wonder that teenagers report having poorer sleep habits, less focus, and a greater sense of being overwhelmed than any other age group?

Parents of high school students are often heard saying “I don’t know how my kid has the time and energy to do everything!”

While it’s true that teenagers have greater resources of energy and stamina than most middle-aged adults, **they lack the vital skills necessary to manage their time and priorities to effectively achieve goals.** Teenagers don’t have the experience to identify time wasters in their busy lives, and don’t have the knowledge of proper time management techniques in order to manage their lives efficiently.



Effective time management is critical for the success of students planning for college. More importantly, adopting the right time management skills while in high school will give students a dramatic boost in effectiveness when they get to college, and prepare the path for a successful career when they enter the workforce.

Goals and Priorities

It may seem a little foolish to start your time management with setting goals, but this step is critical to finding the basis for your time management regime. This exercise should take no more than 10 minutes.

It’s common for students to have many different, and sometimes conflicting, goals. Goals may include:

- Being made sports team leader (i.e. quarterback)
- Getting admitted to a great college
- Making money through a part-time job
- Being voted homecoming king/queen
- Mastering a musical instrument
- Being the best yearbook editor in the history of the school
- Winning a scholarship for college
- Being chosen as valedictorian
- Spending a much time as possible with friends
- Volunteering with a local charity

Start by writing down a list of at least 5 goals. Some will seem very important, and some will be less important.

Your Goal List defines what you spend your time on.

Working from your Goal List, set priorities. Go through the list and pick the most important goal on the list. **What is the one thing that you most need to accomplish?** Note that the wording is what you “need” to accomplish, not what you “want” to accomplish. Everyone wants to master the piano like Mozart, or be a quarterback like Brett Favre. The focus should be on **the one thing that will further your future**, and in doing so, allow you the opportunity to achieve some of your other goals.

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Chances are your top priority is going to be getting into a great college. That doesn't mean that your other goals aren't important – they're very important! They may support your primary goal, or they may afford other rewards like personal satisfaction and personal development. But now you know what your top priority is, and you can firmly fix that in your mind. When you're confronted with a tough choice between two activities, you can simply ask yourself:



“Which activity will help me achieve my top priority?”

School Is a Full-Time Job

Obviously, education in high school is your most important activity to achieve your top priority. Yet parents and students often simply view school as a “has to be done” activity, instead of the first critical step to a successful college career.

School is a full-time job for students. Education involves sitting for long periods in a stationary position, absorbing information, and then demonstrating knowledge by performing a series of writing exercises and projects. Students are critiqued and judged continuously by teachers, and have little-to-no say in due dates and project timelines. They are randomly assigned extra work to take home, and often expected to work with partners that can't or won't carry their weight. Most people would look at this description and think “What a terrible job!”

Parents and students both need to shift their thinking from “school is just a fact of life” to “school is a full-time job.” **That job is learning, and the work is demonstrating knowledge. Students are paid for their work with grades.** The better the work, the better the grades.

The good news – when school is viewed as a full-time job, it is easy to define time limits for the work. A full-time job is generally 40 hours per week, which is an easy rule of thumb for students. Most high school days run for 7 hours (8am to 3pm, 7:30am to 2:30pm, etc), with an hour for lunch and breaks. That's a 6 hour day for students, or 30 hour week. Students should be expected to make up the additional 10 hours per week afterschool and on weekends in dedicated study – an average of about 85 extra minutes per day.

If successful college admission is a top priority for students and parents, 85 minutes per day should be set aside for study.

With the goal of 85 minutes established, plan that time into your day. It could be one large study session when the student arrives home from school, or divided into multiple study sessions, in a study group during a free period, or individual study at lunch, or even studying on the bus on the way to school. It's a goal that is flexible to other activities, like a part-time job or social time, but must be placed as priority ahead of anything else.

Overtime

Just as in real life, if a student wants to be promoted at work (moved to a more advanced class, given a recommendation from a teacher, or offered an exclusive extracurricular activity), he or she needs to put in overtime to demonstrate exceptional skills.

Pocket Work

Students have more time available to study than they think! Time on the bus or in the car getting to school, eating lunch, or waiting for their shift to start at a part-time job can all be time spent towards your goal of 85 minutes, if students are prepared with at least one text book, a notepad and pen.

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“Overtime” is any school activity which will further the goal of being an exceptional college applicant.

Overtime activities can include extra curricular groups, sports activities, additional courses of study, or field trips. Like overtime in the workplace, however, it should be limited to a fixed number of hours per week to avoid burnout. Most parents would consider 5 hours a week of overtime a good trade off for an exceptional promotion opportunity. Students should consider spending no more than 5 hours of time per week on any school-based extra curricular activity. There may be weeks in which that time is greater (e.g. a weekend field trip or sports game), however those periods should not exceed 5 hours per week, when taken as an average over a semester.

The Study Stopwatch

Give your student a stopwatch and ask him/her to start the watch each time he/she is sitting down to study. At the end of the week, count up the hours spent studying.

If he/she is spending less than 10 hours per week, consider working fixed study time into each day.

If he/she is spending more than 10 hours per week in personal study, the student may be engaged in inefficient study methods, and should review his/her study habits to look for time wasters.

Solving the Overwhelmed Feeling

Students often report feeling overwhelmed with a lists of tasks, all of which need to be done. When faced with a pile of work, they may simply shut down and avoid work entirely, creating a snowball effect as more work piles on.

There is a very simple tool for learning to manage an overwhelming list of tasks.

- 1) Quickly write down a list of all the tasks that need to be accomplished. Make that list as long as you want – sometimes just defining all the tasks will bring peace of mind when you see that your problem is about to be acted on.
- 2) Take out a piece of paper and draw the following matrix:

	Important	Not Important
Urgent		
Not Urgent		

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- 3) Simply place each of the tasks in the appropriate category. You can write them out, or cut your list of tasks into strips to place in the right boxes. **Remember – something is important if it will help you achieve your top priority!**
- 4) The trick is then to do things in the right order:

If something is both Important and Urgent, do it right away.

It's not surprising that if something is urgent and important, you should accomplish it first. It's difficult, but **ignore the rest of the boxes until everything in this box is done**, or at least an earnest effort has been made and you're able to push it into the Important/Not Urgent box.

If something is Urgent but not Important, it should be done after your top priority tasks, but only if its something quick.

Something is generally urgent but not important when it's imposed by someone else. E.g. Your best friend is desperate to get your study notes for a test tomorrow. It's not important to you and your priorities, but you feel a sense of urgency to get it done. As a rule of thumb, if you can accomplish something in this box in under 5 minutes, go ahead and do it.

You may be amazed at the number of things which start off in this box! However, as you start to use this matrix on a regular basis, you will find that things begin shifting out of this box – you'll either become known as a person who manages your priorities well and people will stop imposing other demands on you (E.g. Your friend will remember to ask you for your notes earlier), or you'll learn to manage your time so well that you can get these done before they become urgent (E.g. You will remember to give your friend your notes when you're in class together).



If something is Important but not Urgent, start work today and finish tomorrow.

Set aside some time every day to work on things which are important but not urgent. E.g. Your college admissions essay is due in 3 months. It's very important, but you have a long timeline. Spending 10 minutes per day writing or researching your essay will ensure that this critical item never gets pushed into the Important and Urgent category.

If something is Not Important and Not Urgent, don't do it until all other work is complete.

This is the category of time wasters. It's easy to get sucked into the realm of things that are neither important nor urgent, but are great ways to avoid the REAL work. Examples can include answering text messages, going on Facebook, sharpening your pencil, reading a novel, helping someone with a project that's not due for weeks, etc.

Often you will forget to include time wasters in your list, and so they won't be represented on your matrix. Therefore, if you find yourself sidetracked from something in one of the other three boxes, you need to stop and ask yourself "Is this Not Important and Not Urgent?" If your answer is yes, stop doing it immediately until the other work is complete.

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Less Stress, More Time, and Achieving Goals

Time management isn't difficult and it doesn't take a lot of effort. It requires some focused thinking to define goals and priorities, and a few simple tools to create a unique blueprint for college-bound success.

The reward is less stress, a sense of having more time to use, and concrete knowledge that you CAN achieve your college goals. **Start climbing the steps of success today** with your goal list, priorities, and the Important/Urgent matrix.

About the Author

Rhonda Manns is Founder and Director of A2Z College Planning, where she has helped hundreds of college-bound students achieve their dreams.

Rhonda is a Licensed Professional Counselor with over 10 years of experience in the public school system. She is a member of the North Carolina School Counselors Association and The Southern Association for College Admission Counseling, as well as the Higher Education Consultants Association and the Independent Educational Consultants Association (Associate Member).

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