



THE ABC 'TO DO' DAILY PRIORITY SYSTEM OR "WORKING YOUR A'S OFF."

Adapted from Becoming a Master Student Book

It's possible to look busy, even be busy, while accomplishing nothing.

One of the most effective ways to stay on track and actually get things done is to use a daily "to do" list. This is a simple list of things you want to accomplish during the day. Keep the list with you; cross out items when you complete them; add new items when you think of them. While the Time Plan is a general picture of the week, your daily "to do" list is a specific list of things you want to get done within 24 hours.

The advantage of keeping a daily list is that you don't have to remember what to do next. It's on the list. For students, this benefit alone makes the "to do" list worth the energy invested. A typical day in the life of a student is full of separate, unrelated tasks—reading, attending lectures, reviewing notes, working at a job, writing papers, doing special projects, research, errands, etc. It's easy to forget an important job in a busy day. When that job is written down, you don't have to trust your memory.

Keep a "to do" list every day. Write everything you want to accomplish on one sheet of paper, or on a daily planning calendar, a special notebook, or a 3x5 card. Cards work well because you can slip them into your pocket. It's important to complete the daily "to do" list the night before the day you will use it.

Next, rate each task by priority. One way to do this is to label each task A, B or C.

A's on your list are those things that are most important. These are assignments that are due or jobs that need to be done immediately. A priorities also include activities that lead directly to your long-, mid-, or short-term goals.

The B tasks on your list are important, but less so than your A's. B's might become A's someday. These tasks are important, but not as urgent. They can be postponed if necessary.

C's do not require immediate attention.. C items include things like "shop for a new blender" and "get brochures for next year's vacation." C priorities are often small, easy jobs.

Once you've labeled all the tasks on your list, schedule time for all of the A's. The B's and C's, which usually include enjoyable, though not strictly necessary jobs, can be done in odd moments during the day when you are between tasks and don't have time to start the next A.

When you use the ABC priority method, you will discover a condition common to students: C fever. C fever is the uncontrollable urge to drop that A task and begin crossing C's off the list. If your history paper is due tomorrow, you might feel compelled to vacuum the rug, call your third cousin in Tulsa, and make a trip to the store for shoelaces. The reason C fever is so common is that A tasks may be difficult, and the risk of failure is often high. Because they are the most important to us, A's can be threatening.

If you notice symptoms of C fever, ask: "Does this job really need to be done now? Do I really need to alphabetize my record collection, or might I better use this time to study for tomorrow's data processing exam?"

Use your "to do" list to keep yourself on task and working on your A's. Don't panic or berate yourself when you realize that in the last six hours, you have completed 11 C's and not a single A. Calmly return to the A's.

As you complete tasks, cross them off the list. Crossing off things can be fun. When you put a line through an item, it is physical evidence of progress, a visible reward for your diligence.

At the end of the day, evaluate your performance. Look for A's you didn't complete. Look for tasks that repeatedly appear as B's or C's on your list and never seem to get done. Consider changing these to A priority or dropping them altogether. Similarly, you might consider changing an A that didn't get done to a B or C priority item.

Develop your own style. You might find that grouping tasks by categories like "errands" or "reading assignments" works best. Be creative.

And expect to make mistakes. You will assign A priority to some items that turn out to be true C's. Some of the C's that lurk at the bottom of your list day after day should have been A's all along. When you keep a list every day, you are more likely to discover these errors before they become problems.

Make starting a "to do" list an A priority.

