

"Time is on my side." — The Rolling Stones

Wishful thinkers, those Rolling Stones. The truth is, time is only sort of on your side. In fact, it may even be out to get you. The sands of time can bury you, if you let them.

There's a good chance you're already too familiar with the perils of time mismanagement. By the time you graduate, many of you will have pulled a month's worth of all-nighters, cranking out term papers at the last minute, cramming for an exam in a course you've let slip by the boards. But so far you've withstood the test of time, at least the way it's measured on college campuses.

But Real Life Time Management is something else entirely, which is why we're devoting this installment of *The American Express® Real Life Planner™* to a thorough course in organization and planning that explores ways in which you can best manage your soon-to-be-even-busier schedule. Consider that, as a student, you're probably taking no more than four or five courses.

GETTING ORGANIZED

"Organization has nothing to do with being neat," observes organization expert Stephanie Winston, author of the book *The Organized Executive* and president of the management consulting firm, The Organizing Principle. "Neatness or clutter is not the name of the game. What is the name of the game is your ability to manage and process paperwork, because everything in business eventually rides on paper."

Okay, so neatness doesn't count. Many of you no doubt thrive in a clutter-filled environment, so for you this news must come as a welcome relief. But what does count? Well, the most basic rule is that you should be able to quickly locate almost any document, at any time. Time management experts like to use what they call a "one-minute test": if you can't produce a given piece of paper in less than one minute, then you've got to get your act together.

But getting your whole act together can be an intimidating prospect. High-priced organization consultants typically charge as much as \$1000 a day to help untangle your paperwork, a hefty price tag for something you should be able to handle yourself. So, where do you start? Well, anywhere, as long as you do in fact get started. And start small. "A lot of people get

Thus, in a worst-case scenario you might have four or five term papers due the same week, four or five exams the same day. Poor planning can sneak up on you in those worst-cases, but it's not likely to slow you down for any length of time. In the work world, however, you're likely to be faced with two dozen key projects that come due at roughly the same time. On top of that you'll have

to tend to a mountain of paperwork and correspondence as part of your new, everyday routine. Chances are very good that your first job will not take you from one major project to another, one at a time. Instead, you can expect to juggle several projects — some big, some small — and attend to their every detail. You'll have to plan ahead if you want to get ahead, and you'll have to budget your time carefully.

Read on for some practical, real life advice from American Express on how to manage your busy schedule, how to establish your priorities, how to know when and where to look for help, and how to save time in your day to day tasks.



hung up because they think in terms of these vast goals," reports Winston. "They think, 'I have to get my life organized!' There's nothing you can do with that, it's too big. You have to break it down into a reasonable number of very specific problems. For example, you're going to organize your desk because it's chaotic and you can't find anything. Fine, now you're on your way. You have to learn how to break it down into smaller pieces that you can do over a reasonable period of time, rather than crashing into emergency mode the day before something's due."

Winston advises young professionals to develop their paper-processing skills before they diversify into areas more specific to their new professions. "If there's any single thing I would emphasize," she says, "it's that immediately, from the first day you sit down at your first desk on your first job, you should develop a follow-up system. In other words, a very concrete way of keeping track of assignments, discussions with other people, and phone calls that you're supposed to follow up on.

"The simplest way I've found to do this is through something called the 'calendar/holding file' method. Let's say you've writ-

ten a letter to somebody and you expect a reply within two weeks. On your calendar, two weeks from now, the document, which in this case would be a copy of the letter you wrote, just goes into a folder called 'holding.' You're still in a holding pattern, the transaction has not yet been completed. Then, when two weeks comes along, you see your note and you follow up, and in that way nothing gets lost. You have to be able to keep track and follow up."

