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## How to Stop Procrastinating

Tune out distractions and stay on task with these seven expert-approved tactics.

### **Do the Worst Thing First**

Maybe this is the last suggestion you want to hear. But there's a good reason to start with the tough stuff. "We have a limited, depletable supply of willpower and resources," says Piers Steel, Ph.D., a professor of human resources and organizational dynamics at the University of Calgary and the author of *The Procrastination Equation: How to Stop Putting Things Off and Start Getting Things Done* (\$26, [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)). Attack the hardest task when your energy is fresh and you give yourself the strongest chance of success. Doing otherwise can have a damaging domino effect. "Putting off the dreaded item on your list saps your strength," says Eva Wisnik, who conducts time-management training for lawyers and corporations in New York City. Ultimately all your other tasks suffer—

stressing over that worst thing "makes you not completely present with anything else," says Wisnik. So identify and get started on the most heinous project, which is not necessarily the *biggest* job but



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the *baddest*. "Checking it off will make you feel super-productive," says Wisnik, thus infusing with you with gung-ho, it's-all-downhill-from-here enthusiasm.

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### **Start Your Day Over at 2 p.m.**

What's more irritating than witnessing your morning fly by without having dealt with your to-do list? Watching your afternoon roll right along with it. Combat this by implementing a reboot: "At 2 p.m. every day, assess how much you've accomplished, remind yourself of what's critical, and alter your plan so you can tackle the most important thing," says Wisnik. In other words, grant yourself a second morning in the middle of the day (complete with your caffeinated beverage of choice). And if there's a new project that has become high priority, you still have the time and the energy to start it at 2 p.m. "If you wait until 5 p.m. to evaluate your day," says Wisnik, "you're out of time—and in crisis mode, putting out fires."



Ellen Silverman

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### **Make the Job Smaller**

It's natural to get overwhelmed by the size and scope of certain tasks. Joseph Ferrari, Ph.D., a psychology professor at DePaul University, in Chicago, and the author of *Still Procrastinating? The No-Regrets Guide to Getting It Done* (\$16, [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)), says this is a case of "seeing the forest and forgetting that it's made of trees." His advice: "Cut down

one tree. And if you can't cut a whole tree, cut three branches." Instead of being disheartened by how much you *can't* do, look at how much you *can*. If you have 12 boxes of clutter to sort, do only one. On the other hand, if you simply have to get it all done, think about this: Sometimes shrinking a task is about *quality* rather than *quantity*. Says John Perry, a professor of philosophy at the University of California, Riverside, and a cohost of the radio show *Philosophy Talk*: "Ask yourself, 'How good a job do I really need to do?' Some things are not important enough to warrant perfection." It makes more sense to do top-notch work when updating your résumé, for example, than when drawing up flyers for a block party.



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### Create an Audience

It's easy to blow things off when your commitment to yourself is the only thing at stake. But make yourself accountable to a friend and suddenly potential embarrassment becomes a powerful motivator. It's "positive pressure," says life coach Cheryl Richardson, the author of *Take Time for Your Life* (\$14, [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)). Just as you're more likely to exercise when you're meeting a friend at the gym, you may be more apt to fill out critical paperwork if you have a partner looking over your shoulder (even virtually). Fear of letting someone down might be the perfect motivator. Call a friend or a sibling (not the warm-and-fuzzy kind—the tough-nut, no-excuses kind) and tell her what you plan to get done. Ask her to check in and crack the



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whip at an appointed time. Then let the fear of disappointment work its dark magic.

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### **Race the Clock**

Having trouble even beginning a burdensome project? Try the old trick of setting a timer for 10 minutes. Work in a focused, perhaps even frantic manner for that short stretch, and watch what happens. "Anyone can do 10 measly minutes," says Debbie Mandel, a stress-management specialist in New York City and the author of *Addicted to Stress: A Woman's 7-Step Program to Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life* (\$23, [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)). "You may get engrossed and end up working even longer." Once a sense of satisfaction replaces the dread you felt before, there's a decent chance you'll continue. Another trick to moving past that initial paralysis is to create what has been called an "implementation intention," says Pychyl. Instead of simply identifying your goal, establish how and when you'll actually accomplish it. For example: *Saturday morning at 11, get the kids to figure out exactly which printer cartridge we need; go to Staples at noon.*



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### **Don't Interrupt Yourself**

If you get pulled away from tasks by every ding, whistle, and ring on your digital devices, well, you're like most of us. But keep in mind that other people aren't interrupting you; you

are interrupting yourself. (This is tough love, folks.) The way to break free from technology is, ironically, to employ it: There are a slew of applications you can download to block electronic distractions. Freedom ([macfreedom.com](http://macfreedom.com), \$10) disables all roads to the Internet for an allotted amount of time. And cheating isn't easy—to sneak back online early, you have to reboot your computer. RescueTime (free, [rescuetime.com](http://rescuetime.com)) tracks your every online move and provides easy-to-read, painfully revealing charts. Seeing your wasted time in pretty graphs is a bracing slap in the face. (*That's how many hours I spent on Facebook yesterday?*) And LeechBlock (free, [addons.mozilla.org](http://addons.mozilla.org)) works with the Internet browser Firefox so you can block certain sites—or all of them—either perpetually or during specific periods. If you have an addiction to those online sample sales with new offerings every 15 minutes, you can use this app to take away temptation. Same principle as keeping your favorite cookies out of the house.



James Baigrie

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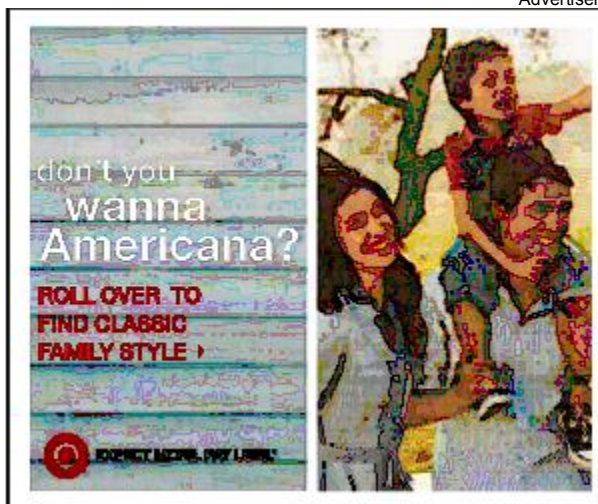
### Plan an Unprocrastination Day

Gather your most neglected tasks and a no-nonsense companion and head off on an odyssey of productivity, vowing not to return home until your long ignored to-do's are done. Editor at large Danielle Claro recently attempted this. Here's her [play-by-play](#).



Tamara Shopsin and Jason Fulford

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