

Student Hub Live Bootcamp - day 1 - Time Management

KAREN FOLEY: Well, time is pressing on. And without further ado, we're going to address some time management. Now, who is the right person to do this Well, a mineralogist and planetary scientist, I think, is what we need. So Susanne Schwenzer, thank you for coming along.

Now, when you're not specialising in Martian topics, we're talking a lot about time management, aren't we? And you're an expert at this, because you have a lot of things to do, very exciting things to do, in fact. You've been gallivanting all over the place. And so when you're not studying rock integration and noble gases on the Red Planet, can you tell us how you're managing your busy academic life and why you feel that you're an expert to tell our students about time management?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Well, my expertise in time management goes back to the time when I did a PhD, because I was fascinated also by a museum. And it happened that I had to turn in my PhD two days before we had an exhibition at Frankfurt Airport and with a totally volunteer-driven museum. And I am the only scientist on the team. I had to learn very quickly how to actually get all of this sorted and how to get all the demand sorted.

And so I did the first thing, which looking back, was very smart. I read a book about time management. And all I have to say today is from what I read back then, what I practised back then. I'm not an expert. I'm not a coach. I'm just talking from my experience.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Well, I'm glad we've got someone here from science, because something's been puzzling me all day. I put lemons and limes in this jar. And the lemons are all floating, and the limes are all sinking. What's that all about?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Well, you are surprising me here. Well, since planetary science has a bit of physics, let's go back to the basics here. I mean, what floats must be lighter than water, have a smaller density.

KAREN FOLEY: But they're both citrus fruits.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Maybe your lemons have a thicker skin because that white under the yellow skin is usually quite fluffy. And if they have a bit of a thicker skin, they might float. And the limes with a very, very thin skin, they might sink. Maybe it's just a little bit of air trapped in the skin.

KAREN FOLEY: Probably.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: You could verify that. You could now measure the thickness of the skin.

KAREN FOLEY: I could, but we don't have time.

[LAUGHTER]

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Right. Good point.

KAREN FOLEY: So OK, excellent. So Susanne, let's take a look then at some of the things that are very common sense. Because time management is one of those things that often we'll sit down and look at. There's a really nice resource, actually, on the website, which I was doing on the weekend when I was procrastinating, looking at time management. And it gives you an idea about how to prioritise and categorise different tasks.

Now, time management, I think, is one of these sorts of things that people often know about. We theoretically know we need to manage our time. We need to identify our priorities. But often, as you say, we think, but I must really go and read a book about time management instead. Or I must do something a little bit different and procrastinate. So how can you give people ideas about really doing, this bearing in mind that a lot of us know a lot theoretically about it?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Well, to me, one of the most important things is to take the time to think about my time management and to categorise things. And there is a very easy scheme, where they say you categorise in A, B, and C, with A being important and needs to be done immediately, B being still important but has a little bit more time, at least at that moment where you look at it, and C, being neither important nor very timely. And then you've got a scheme.

You start with a scheme. And then you can write a list. And you can see, what is the actually most important thing I need to do? And start there. And another thing that comes into the procrastination a little bit, if we feel something is really hard, we tend to procrastinate more than if we think something is interesting and I can do that. Or we procrastinate more when we think, oh, that's a mundane task. That's actually really boring. So either if it's too complicated or if it's boring, we don't really want to do it.

And one thing that I tell my students and also do myself a lot is start with that. Do the boring thing first thing in the morning before you even had coffee. And that way, you've got it out of the way. You feel free. You feel you've achieved something already. And that stops you in wasting a lot of time that you could actually use to do something more interesting or just go for a walk.

KAREN FOLEY: I'd like to see what's happening on the hot desk and what tips people have got. I saw a really interesting post on the OU's Facebook page today. I can't remember the exact wording of it, but it was sort of like, next year I will, so something people would be doing differently next year. And I wonder if you've got any ideas about things that you're doing for your time management or any tips, et cetera, that you've got? Sophie and HJ, have people come up with any ideas? Or are you still talking about cake?

SOPHIE: There's still a little bit of cake conversation. But we had a few come in, things like lists. People are a fan of lists, and mind maps, and Post-it notes.

HJ: Yes.

SOPHIE: Everyone seems to like Post-it notes.

HJ: Everyone seems to like Post-it notes.

SOPHIE: Yes.

HJ: Don't they?

But I think Julia also said it's a bit of a random question about lemons and limes. And I like, Michael wants to know now on the follow up to that, do limes float in gin and tonic? So maybe we'll have to find that one out. But I think Davon said he recently found a good audiobook that he wished he'd found at the start of his studies called The Art of Learning. So thanks for sharing that. And, yeah, we'll have to look that, I'll have to look that up. I'm really excited to start. But I'm also very nervous as well, so this is very useful. But, yes.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Well, thank you. And Anna apparently can't survive without either lists or cake. Now, lists are a good idea. And Georgina has shown us the study planner, which has a phenomenal list. That's the list of the module. That's everything you've got to cover in that.

So we know these lists are important. We can A, B, or C them. How do students then take and manage their time from getting that study planner, and then thinking about what they need to do, and prioritising them? Because I mean, it's difficult, especially if you've got a published list. And it's like this is my module list. And I think, oh, maybe I should be doing it in that order. Maybe I should be doing X, Y, or Z. We've seen as well that there are various videos. There are various resources. There's various activities that people need to fill in and do and then book chapters, obviously, as well.

And we know that people who have a lot of anxieties around their time. And they're out and about. They're often working, et cetera. How do they then manage their time with this study planner that they've got with all these various activities that are listed in a linear order? How do you deconstruct that list and make your own list?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Yes, I think deconstruction is the key word here. And we heard before that the lists are already broken down a little bit. But the lists need to be broken down even more, because every person is different. And someone might be very, very easy with the task of doing some of the math questions maybe. I'm a scientist, so I'm always thinking about the math first, but being not so easy with reading a lot of text. And then you need to try to find, to assign your own times.

And a lot of that is experience. But there's also something else to that. If you plan for your time, you need to add a little bit of buffer. So if you think, I can read that text in two hours, then you have to think what else might happen in these two hours. First of all, is it a good idea to try to do it in one block? Maybe it is. Maybe that's the time span you can focus. Maybe your focus span is only an hour, so you need to plan for a break in between.

But also, you need to think what else might happen. Do my kids come home from school? Do I have to have dinner in between, because dinner time is in between and I can't read hungry? So it's a lot of individual planning of the exact day and of the exact task. And as a rule of thumb, because that sounds very complicated, what I do is if I have a task, I think, OK, this will take me half an hour. Then I will ask myself the question, is everything in there in my control?

So is my time, is the task, everything in my control? Yes, then I add just 10% for my own mind wandering. If it is not, because someone might actually come to my house or in my office, or I need a response from someone before I can move on and do the second part of that same task, then I add 20% of time to that half hour that I think it would take me. And that gives you these little chunks of time that you most of the time actually do need. But if you don't need them, well, then you can bake a cake.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, yes, you could. You sound so, so very, very organised. Now, one thing I do know is that a lot of the time on these study planners, they'll say, oh, this will take so long. So this is a one hour activity. And a bit like the SatNav - not that I ever speed - but a bit like the SatNav, I think, oh, could I do it in a little bit less? What would you say about people adjusting and learning their sort of times and how those might work within that study planner context?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Well, first of all, is for those who are just starting out, they need to try and find out how long they need. And what I tell my students when they start is, why don't you, for the first week or so, sit down and then make a little table on a scrap paper and say, OK, they say it takes an hour. It actually took me 50 minutes. Or they say this takes an hour, and it took me an hour and a half. So you get a feeling for the tasks first. Because those who are new to the OU, they will figure out within probably the first two to three weeks how times measure up to what we think they measure up.

KAREN FOLEY: And it's a really good point, actually. I'm glad you've mentioned going over. Because that's nothing to do with how bright or not you are. It's just how long it takes you to do something. And it's better to read something thoroughly with meaning. I mean, the amount of times that I've read something and then I put it down and think, what did I read? I've read it quickly. I haven't retained any of it. And so it's important that you sort of measure that.

I'd like to look at what people said was important in terms of time management so that we can pick up on some of these. Because it seems like we've got a very conscientious bunch of people out there. So Susanne, these are some of the things that people have said are important. So these are the three most important things. We've got planning, prioritising. Sticky labels are a big thing, very important. And I'd like to talk about stationery in a minute as well, thinking ahead, being realistic as well, which I think is so important.

And a lot of this, another word here is flexibility. So thank you for all of those. This flexibility is a really important thing. So whilst we can sort of make our time and deconstruct our plan, we can use various devices and things that can help us.

Now, people have said they love stationery. They love Post-it notes, et cetera. We've got some various things here that should make life a breeze. I mean, some of these things like these academic wall planners that you can put on. We have a nice thing about not only putting the content on here, but also putting tips, et cetera. What would be some of the ways that you would recommend people might be able to structure or use some of these lovely colourful things like highlighters, a keen favourite, to actually help plan their time?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Well, what I do is because time management, as you say, needs to be very flexible and tasks come in, first of all, don't just plan your studies. Plan your life

with it. Because otherwise, you will have a constant conflict. If you, for example, need to do something else, you need to bake that cake for a friend's birthday,

KAREN FOLEY: Could we stop talking about cakes, please? I'm getting really hungry.

[LAUGHTER]

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Well, you started it.

KAREN FOLEY: I didn't start it.

I think it was Helen I think you'll find.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: OK, if you really have to clean your kitchen - let's get away from that - but if you have to do something else that's really important and that you can't get around, you need to factor that in. Because not only will you feel bad if you only get one thing done, the studies or the other task, but also, if you sit down to study and think, but I also have to, but I also have to, you won't be able to focus. Then you read that text, and you haven't retained anything.

So what I do is I try to put everything on my list. And I have one here. I don't know if it comes through with a camera, but I have a list here that has all the tasks that I need to do.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, my goodness. OK. This is Susanne's to-do list.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: It has all the tasks that I need to do in my research, in my teaching, and for administration. And yes, of course, it's a bit fudged. I have to take some names out.

KAREN FOLEY: You've got nice tick lists.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: And it's a tick list, right. And it's got colours. So you asked me how you could use these colours. Because it has colours as to whether I have to do something this week, I can do it next week, or I can do it even later. And sometimes, the highlighter comes in for importance. So in that way, I can add things.

KAREN FOLEY: What's that noise?

SOPHIE: I got a bit hungry. You mentioned frankfurt airport, so I just made some hot dogs. Anyone want one? Anyone like a hot dog?

HJ: Well, I wouldn't mind one. Well, you know.

[LAUGHTER]

SOPHIE: There's one.

KAREN FOLEY: Sophie, (WHISPERING) you're supposed to be doing a chat.

SOPHIE: Well, I am.

[LAUGHTER]

SOPHIE: If I don't eat, I mean, it's not going to be very pretty.

HJ: And they're all talking about food as well, isn't it? It's not fair. So you know, we've to have some food as well. They're all eating cake and drinking tea.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, don't get ketchup on that keyboard, Sophie. I'll try not to. I'll try.

SOPHIE: Thanks.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: But she's doing a very important thing there. Because if you think about sports people, sports people, they talk about their nutrition all the time. They talk about their preparation all the time.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, we have nice oranges. They're eating frankfurters.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Right, but she might just need a few calories right now. It's always a question of the time of getting your body in shape as well. If you have too much caffeine and too little sleep, you better go and take a nap and study when you have caught up on your sleep. If you are really hungry, you wouldn't be able to study. If you just have this big Sunday roast you wouldn't be able to study as well.

And so you need to factor all of this into your time management, because it's not just about doing something, sitting in front of your book. It's also about being fit, being focused, and being concentrated. And that is part of time management as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. I have a thing of Brazil nuts by my desk. And so I have a handful of nuts, because I've noticed that otherwise, I get these cravings to go off and have Marmite on toast very late at night if I'm working for long periods. But you know, I suppose you are right. It is about having an important mix. And I guess the types of food that you eat also matter.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Yes, but honestly, for study, a little bit of something to eat is better than being really hungry. Because if your blood sugar levels are low, your brain doesn't work. Of course, you should eat healthy overall. But eating nothing and trying to study is probably the worst thing that you can do, as well as over-eating on heavy stuff. And then your blood isn't in your brain, to say it in a very colloquial way.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: OK. While everyone is now craving hot dogs, Sophie, so thank you very much for that. Hot dog sales will now soar through the roof. I hope they're delicious, because I can't eat any over here as well. Anything else sensible going on there?

HJ: Well, we got loads of, like, really great study tips, what everyone is doing. People are talking about all these different techniques. We got a Pomodoro technique, bullet journaling, Cornell note taking methods. So we're going to look all this up. And there was a great suggestion, because people are showing all these great websites and great resources, so we're going to put them all together. And I think we can put them on the Resources section on our website as well for everyone to share.

But Lucy had a great question for you as well. She says, with time management, is it a good idea to plan in breaks or is it better to keep going until you feel you need a break?

KAREN FOLEY: Good question.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: It's a very good question. And I would always suggest to plan the breaks in, because you might feel you are just on a roll. And then, yeah, of course you can always skip the break. But you should ask yourself very critically if you really want to skip the break or whether you want to take that break, take a breather. Because like an athlete, they can run a lot. But they can't run forever. And your brain can run a lot, but it can't run forever.

There is, however, one thing about our brain. You sometimes get into that daydreaming mode, the flow mode. And then you don't really want to interrupt yourself. But chances are you won't think about your break anyway if you are in a flow mode. And you will just keep going, because you are totally focused. And you are focused on only that task in that mode.

If you get there, you will probably skip the break. It happened to me this morning that my colleague said, oh, I'm going for coffee. It's 11 o'clock. And I thought it was probably 9:00 or 9:30. That's a good thing to happen, and you usually achieve a lot in that. But most of the days, you look at your watch and you think, is the time for the break now? Because you are getting tired after a while.

KAREN FOLEY: So what would you say is a good time? I mean, there are lots of different theories on this. And I guess, to a large extent, it's about figuring out people's own routine and their own bodies and what works best and also in terms of what time of day maybe they're studying. But as a sort of general rule of thumb, what would you say would be a good sort of length of time to plan things to?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Anything between 45 minutes and an hour is usually quite good, because that's how long a school lesson is. And that's where we are used to from our school days. Even if that's long ago, you would be surprised how long this hangs on with you. And then you can go from there, and you can experiment. Am I better if I do it a bit shorter? Am I better if I go for the full hour? But 45 minutes is a good place to start.

KAREN FOLEY: OK, brilliant. And we'll talk about that next in our session with Sharon Davis, where we're going to be looking at the times of day, and the types of tasks you might be doing, and how we can fit that in. The idea of running and having a break is really important. I mean, it's something I often do. I'll read something, and then I'll, say, I'll go for a quick run. And then I'll mull it over in my head and have that processing time.

It's something I think that people don't often factor into time management, is that time to reflect and think, what have I actually learned? And how much sense did I make of that? And it's something as well that when we start talking about critical thinking is really important. Because it's one of those things that you can know the material. And it's all very sensible, being written in a book. But until you actually think, well, what does that really mean? How does that really relate to this? Those sorts of times to think are difficult to time plan, aren't they?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: They are, on the one hand, difficult to time plan. But if you have a 10 minute time slot after your studies that's dedicated to reflecting, then you at least have a start. You've got time to do it. And you are not thinking, OK, I read until three. Then I jump up, and I do something else. But if you say, I read until 2:50 and then I take 10 minutes to just think, you at least give yourself the opportunity.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Well, Leon and Arella are so glad that they're here. And we're glad you're here, too. They've apparently picked up loads. So I'm really, really pleased about that. Right, age-old problem to sort of spend our last few minutes on, procrastination and time wasting, something I did whilst reading the time management resources on the website, rather ironically.

But there are lots of different ways to procrastinate. And I can see Facebook and Twitter and Bake Off being large ones that people might get sidetracked in. And it's very easy, like you say, to completely lose track of time, not that you were procrastinating, because I don't imagine you'd do that with your tick list, but say you were. So getting the sense of things is wasting time, important, is that an important part of the thing? And how do you stop it? What do you do about that, bearing in mind it does happen, rather like eating considerable amounts of cake?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: It's, to me, it's something that I sort of plan as well. Because I know if Germany - I'm German - if Germany plays in a soccer game versus someone, and I will probably be way too interested in watching that. And so I plan my breaks around things that I know I will be procrastinating on, because there is no point in studying while I worry what the soccer scores are next door.

On the other hand, it's also a question about thinking why you procrastinate. I mentioned that in the beginning. If a task, you feel a task is too hard, you are much more likely to procrastinate. And then one thing is to break it down and to say, OK, before I look at Facebook next, I do just this little bit, 10 minutes of that a little bit, until you drag yourself in. Because procrastination comes quite often when you are unsure about the task, when it feels too big. And whenever a task feels too big, go and break it down.

You showed my tick list earlier. And my tick list has lots and lots of very, very, very little items. And that's because every of these items might take half an hour. If I feel it's still too big, I break it into two. And then you have little steps.

It's like climbing a mountain. You've got this mountain ahead of you. If someone says, oh, just go climb that mountain, you probably find an excuse. But once you have started to walk, it's one step after the other.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, and everyone has their own study tips which they're all sharing in the chat, and thank you for that, which are working for them. One of them I particularly liked is Dawn and Sarah says that, well, she leaves her mobile in the other room so that it doesn't distract her. And I know, I mean, sometimes I'll turn my email off if I'm trying to do something, but things that where you do have those distractions, actually eliminating that source of information can really help you crack on with what you need to do.

I know somebody who is an expert at procrastination. HJ, you've made a video on it, which unfortunately we don't have today. But I will get it the next time.

[LAUGHTER]

SOPHIE: We've had a really nice email in actually from Carrie with a good study tip on procrastination in the social media. On Facebook, there is a setting where you can disable the account for a couple of hours, or some days, or even weeks. So obviously, that would really stop your procrastination on things like Facebook and social media. So that's a really good tip. I liked that one.

HJ: I think Charlotte as well, she says she makes her husband take over the TV with his PlayStation when he has to study. I'd like that. Getting rid of all these temptations is very important, I think. But Harry's got me to look up mug cakes, which is really cool.

SOPHIE: Oh, I do.

HJ: So I think we're going to have to do that. And Laura's got an idea that we should do an OU bake-off, which I really like. I think we could do that, couldn't we?

SOPHIE: Definitely. We have to do it.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, in your microwave we couldn't.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Which I'm very disappointed is in the studio. OK so some really good ideas, and as HJ has said, were going to collate all of those. So anything else that springs out mind that you want to share with other students, send us the link in the chat or an email, StudentHub@open.ac.uk. Or the hashtag is a studenthublife16.

We'll collate all of those. And we'll put them on the Resources page of the website so that you can pick those up and make the most of those. But everybody sounds very conscientious out there, Susanne. I think the people obviously watching this are very organised, getting set up to study. So what would be your final advice in terms of managing time for people?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: See your success. Look at what you've already done, because it's so easy to just get lost in staring at that mountain that's in front of you. Turn around once in a while and see what have you achieved? What have you done? Which boxes did you tick? You saw, on my tick list, there are little boxes that I can actually tick. And that gives you a sense of achievement and will help stop procrastination and get your motivation, also your focus, up.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Well, Susanne, thank you so much for joining me today. It's your lunch time now.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: So.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: You don't mind, I actually brought a lunch box here.

KAREN FOLEY: Right.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Yeah. I can take it.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, no, I've got another guest coming on.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Yes, so well, I take it with me again. I'll have my lunch elsewhere.

KAREN FOLEY: What's in your lunch box?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: I don't know really. What did I pack this morning? I did this in a hurry.

KAREN FOLEY: It's a very sweet lunch box.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: I did this in a hurry.

KAREN FOLEY: I can't believe you brought a lunch box.

[LAUGHTER]

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Oh, look at that.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: A banana.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Yes. A banana.

KAREN FOLEY: An apple.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: An apple. And that's very, very important as well, some sugar and energy to get me through the afternoon.

KAREN FOLEY: OK, Susanne. Well, thank you very much. I must say, you're not only healthy but incredibly organised. And thank you for all of your time management tips and for explaining that it's always useful to have someone from science here. So thanks for that. And keep those tips up.

And next in the studio is going to be Sharon Davis. And we're going to be talking about what to do first. But let me go back to Sophie and HJ. I hope your lunch is as healthy as Susanne's was.

HJ: Well, I don't know. I brought my lunch box, too. So I got a little tomato lunchbox. I think Sophie's got a more grown up lunchbox than me, though, I think.

SOPHIE: I do, actually.

HJ: It's a very sensible one.

But I really like my tomato lunchbox.

SOPHIE: Yeah.

HJ: But I, oh, what have I got in here today? Uh, oh, it's not very healthy. It's chocolate and sweets.

SOPHIE: A tomato lunchbox with chocolate in it. There's some irony there.

HJ: I'm going to put that away, because I know everyone will be disappointed.

KAREN FOLEY: You can't talk Sophie with your hot dog carry on.

SOPHIE: I have grapes, though.

KAREN FOLEY: OK.

[LAUGHTER]

HJ: This is balancing out, isn't it? Well, I've got, I think one study tip that I saw which was really cool is some people put sweets along their pages. And every time they get to a section, they eat them, which I think is really good. And I have done that as well. So the only problem is I buy a tub of sweets, and I eat most of them before I get to put them on my page, which is -

KAREN FOLEY: One for me, one for the page.

HJ: Yeah, I think that's how it works. But I like that idea, so I've been using that. And I'm probably going to power through these now as well.

[MUSIC PLAYING]