Student Success Skills for Polar Bears

Breaking down large projects into manageable tasks

Do you tend to **procrastinate** working on large projects? Do large projects paralyze you and you don't even know where to **start**? Do you want to feel like you are **making progress** towards achieving your goals?

If so, break down your large project into smaller, more manageable tasks. It is easier to work on a short task (30-90 minutes) than on a large project (weeks/months). The following steps will help you break your large project (e.g. paper, lab report, presentation, etc.) into bite-size pieces.

Step 1: Define milestones

- Break a large project into monthly, weekly or daily subprojects, aka milestones.
- Define milestones based on different phases or different categories of the project.

Step 2: Define tasks needed to reach the milestones

- Define the tasks that need to be done to complete each milestone.
- **Brainstorm** and write down every single step you can think of.
- Use **specific** verbs (e.g., write 300 words, read chapter 3, proofread my draft) to describe your tasks (avoid broad verbs: "do' or "work on")

Step 3: Put those tasks in the right order

- Think about the logical order of completing those bite-size pieces.
- What should you do first, second, third, etc.?

Step 4: Add the tasks to your calendar

- Ask yourself for each step, how long will this take me?
- Overestimate how long each task will take to ensure you have built-in buffer time.
- Ideally, work in sessions between 25 and 90 minutes long. If your list entails steps that might take longer than 90 minutes, try to break them down further.
- Add the small tasks to your calendar, starting at the project due date (or ideally even 2 days before that) and work your way backwards.
- Assign yourself a deadline to each task, which will help you focus.

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Example: How to break down a large project into milestones and small tasks (Step 1 and 2)



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