

HOW TO PRIORITIZE WHEN EVERYTHING IS #1

Prioritizing your work is not that easy. You have to identify which things need to be done and in what order. There are things that are normally unimportant (filing your taxes) that can become very important (on 16 April) if they are not planned and completed in a timely basis. Getting organized is the first step in learning how to prioritize – learning what needs to get done now because it is due; what needs to happen in time, but not immediately; and what is upcoming or on the radar.

The way you organize, plan, and prioritize your life (and your work) have no set answers. The way you do things is ultimately up to you. People are different, so what works for you may not work for someone else. Still, some guidelines can help you in prioritizing your work.

One of the biggest challenges many people is prioritizing work on a short-term (daily/weekly) basis. You want to prioritize what matters when it matters – you do not want to waste time on something that was due yesterday when another project is due in 20 minutes. You also need to avoid believing that everything that comes into your world is a “top priority.”

Here are six steps to prioritizing your work.

1. **Collect a list of all your tasks.** Pull together everything you could possibly consider getting done in a day or week. Don't worry about the order, or the number of items up front.
2. **Identify urgent vs. important.** The next step is to see if you have any tasks that need immediate attention. This is work or events that, if not completed by the end of the day or in the next several hours, will have serious negative consequences for you or others. You must also consider if there are any high priority items that rely on other work to be completed first.
3. **Assess value.** Next, look at your important work and identify what carries the highest value to you. As a general practice, you want to recognize exactly which types of tasks have top priority over the others. This might be higher-credit courses, courses in your major, or classes with homework that takes more time than others do. Just remember your overall priorities – if getting an A in a class requires 10 hours of reading, you cannot de-prioritize your homework time.
4. **Order tasks by estimated effort.** If you have tasks that seem to tie for priority standing, check their estimates, and start on whichever one you think will take the most effort to complete. Productivity experts suggest the tactic of starting the lengthier task first. If you feel like you can't focus on your meatier projects before you finish up the shorter task, then go with your gut and do that. It can be motivating to check a small task off the list before diving into deeper waters.
5. **Be flexible and adaptable.** Uncertainty and change is a given. Know that your priorities will change, and often when least expected. But it's very important to learn the difference between being flexible and getting distracted.
6. **Know when to cut.** You probably can't get to everything on your list. After you prioritize your tasks and look at your estimates, cut the remaining tasks from your list, and focus on the priorities that you know you must and can complete for the day or week. Then take a deep breathe, dive in and be ready for anything.