



# BALANCING TIME

Managing Priorities while Teaching and Learning

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# Introduction



As graduate students and instructors, it can often be challenging to figure out how to fit in multiple, sometimes conflicting responsibilities and priorities into the finite hours of a day. While this is often already challenging, trying to do all the things in the midst of the global pandemic along with current widespread protests against police brutality and systemic racism generates additional dimensions.

On top of the added mental and emotional load that can come with widespread uncertainty and heightened calls to action, there are also shifts material factors and resources, including the loss of workspace and access to materials (books, library, computer labs), to the complications of sharing space and childcare all in the same space of “working from home.”

It is important to acknowledge that planning and preparing for distance education online requires a different preparation and cadence, often require more preparation before class sessions to get various materials and platforms ready.

For instance, this workshop is presented as a PDF workbook while also having a digital space for the reflection questions. (<https://padlet.com/chuameilingchua/BalancingTime>). The rationale for the pdf was to be digitally accessible and allow you to work at your own pace, while also providing the option for printing and writing by hand in case you are tired of screens or prefer it. Padlet was selected to provide a space for sharing and thinking with others asynchronously.

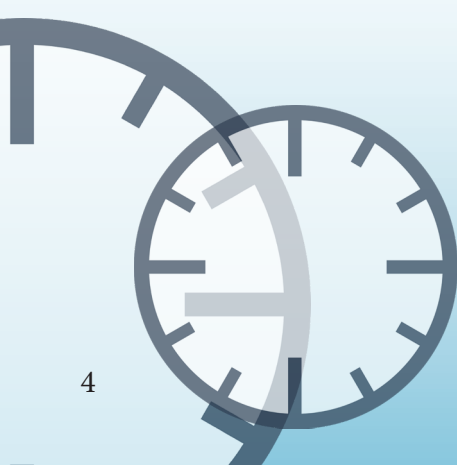
The shifting to different forms of media, asks us to shift our attention in different ways, and that is something that we need to account for when protecting our time, attuning to how we spend our energy and structure our priorities.

# Assess the Situation


Getting a sense of where things are for you is a great place to start. In addition to identifying the barriers and where managing time has been difficult, it can also be helpful to think of what has been working for you.

*Take a few moments to write down your answers to the following questions in relation to how you are spending your time:*

**What are you struggling with?**



**What's going well?**

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**What do you spend too much/too little time on?**

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to write their response to the question 'What do you spend too much/too little time on?'. The box is currently blank.



# What Do I Do?



While the last activity takes a broad overview of the situation, another helpful approach can be to look at the situation from the ground up, and actually list the granular detail of what you do.

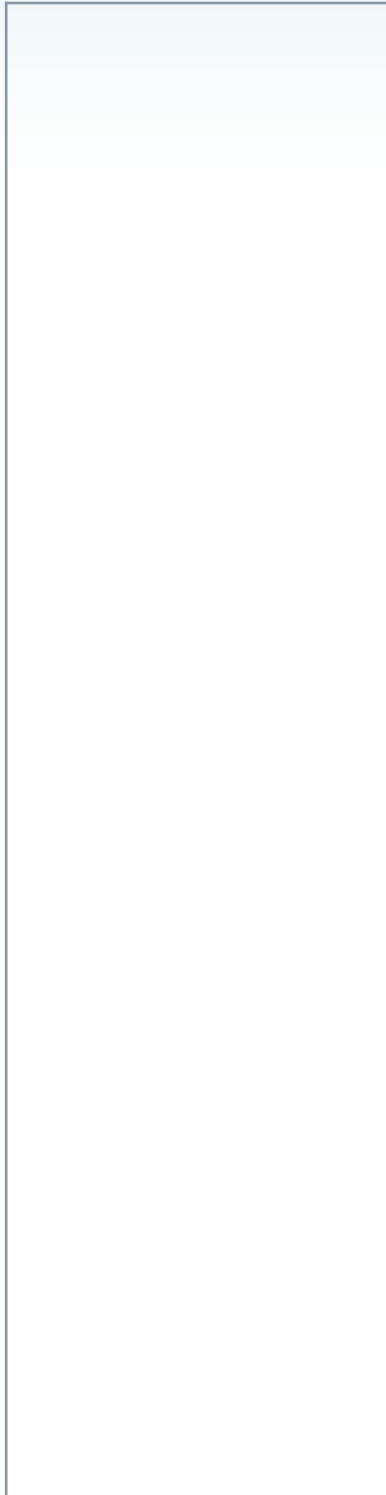
In addition to our work as researchers and instructors, it is also important to remember that all the other things we need and want to do as humans also take time. Things like, getting groceries, having a social life, exercising, self care, etc. are all important and valid things!

Developing a sense of both where your time is going and also of what else you want to fit in is the first step in being able to secure and restructure your time. The tables on the next two pages will ask you to think about what you do across three categories, life, research, and teaching.

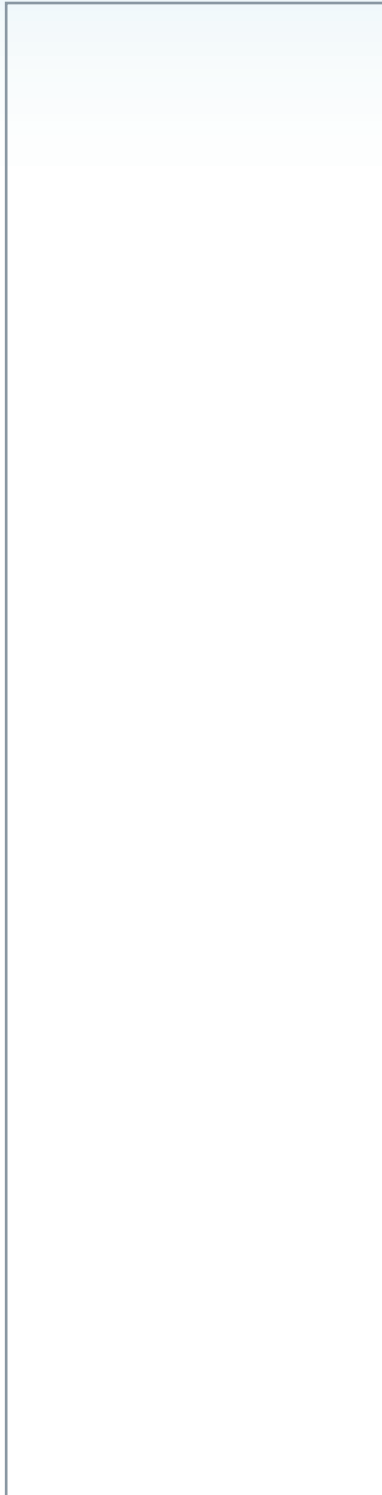
*So what are you currently doing? How are you actually spending your time? Be ruthlessly honest, sometimes it can be surprising where your time goes when you sit down to look at it!*

**THINGS I AM DOING** (honestly, day-to-day, for a week, how I am choosing to live)

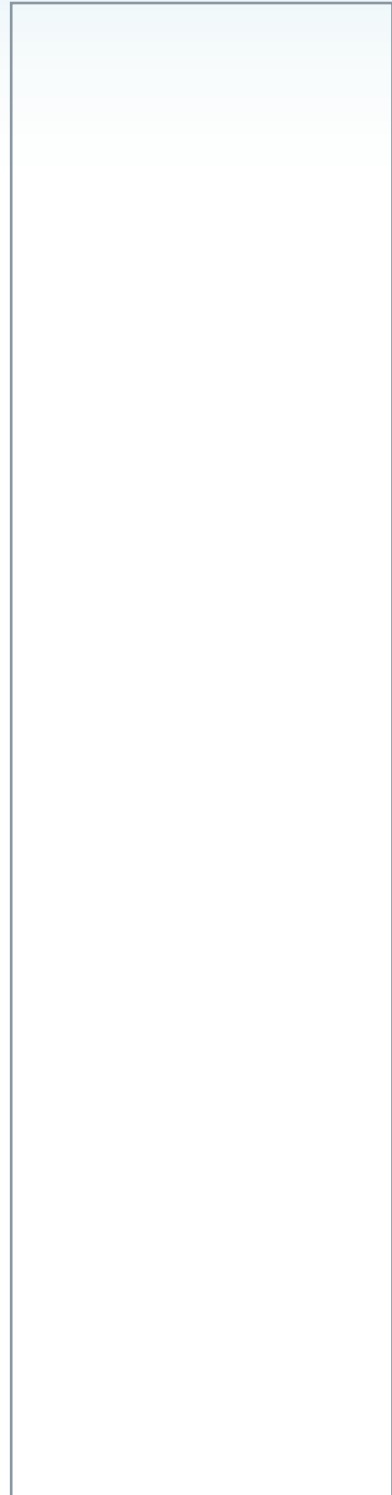
**LIFE**



**RESEARCH**



**TEACHING**





*Are there things you would like to do that you aren't currently doing?*



**THINGS I WANT/NEED TO DO** (wishing and hoping)

**LIFE**

**RESEARCH**

**TEACHING**

## AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH FOR THE ACTIVITY

If it is difficult to think of what you do in one sitting or if you would like a more detailed sense of things, an alternate way of doing the exercise on the previous page is to record what you actually do each day for a few days, what Joli Jenson calls a “reverse day planner.”

*Before we move on to the next part, take a few moments to consider the following questions, and please do join the digital conversation/commiseration/collective figuring-out at <https://padlet.com/chuameilingchua/BalancingTime> for this and the other reflection questions.*

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Did anything surprising come up when looking at your time this way?

What was the most shocking or unexpected thing did you learn about how you spend time?

# The Human Factor...

Rather than merely being about task to time and productivity, it is also important to think about the human factors when thinking about your time and schedule.

Part of this is **understanding your energy** as it ebbs and flows over the course of a day. Are you sharper in the morning, more of a night owl, or another time? In addition to considering your natural energy fluctuations in a day, is there also a pattern to how it might vary weekly, monthly, or even seasonally?

Understanding your own patterns can help you align your most important tasks or task that require your strongest mental efforts for the times that you are the sharpest. It can also point to when it might be helpful to schedule breaks or time less important tasks for other times.

Another human factor that can be helpful to recognize is that there often are **emotional, affective components** to our various tasks and responsibilities. (More on this in the procrastination section.) These can be feelings towards the tasks themselves, or even wider **social and environmental factors**, like having to work in a loud, chaotic space versus a quiet, calmer one, or being nervous of speaking in front of a large audience. Or, on another scale, the widespread uncertainty and disruption that has been 2020.

*Take a few moments to consider the following:*

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What are your own high and low energy patterns? How might this help how or when you schedule different tasks?

What are some of the factors that are causing you to procrastinate on the tasks that you put off?

Have you experienced shifts in your energy, attention, or productivity during the global pandemic and protests of 2020? Why?

# (Re)Structuring Your Time

Great! Now that we have an honest, unabashed look at what you actually do in your days. Now that we can see where the time goes, we can start to assess our activities and align how that time is spent with more intention. The act of scheduling can be a protection of the valuable and finite resource of our time and energy. We can start allocating and blocking out time for things that are important, but also “match our energies to our priorities” (Jensen, p33).

This next activity adapted from Joli Jensen’s book, *Write No Matter What*, will help us think about the energetic needs of a task to help us use our energy more wisely.

- A = tasks that require the most energy, and you at your sharpest
- B = tasks that require alertness and focus, but not your best creativity
- C = rote tasks, like going through email, etc.

Notice what energizes you and what drains you, and structure your day around that.

*Take a few moments to consider the following:*

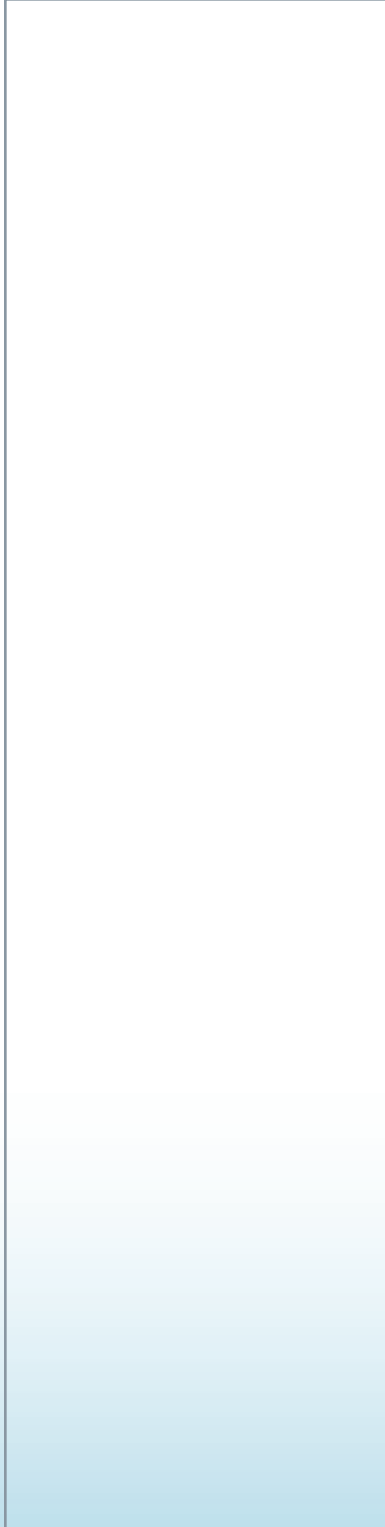
## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

**Do you do better working in brief sessions or longer sessions?**

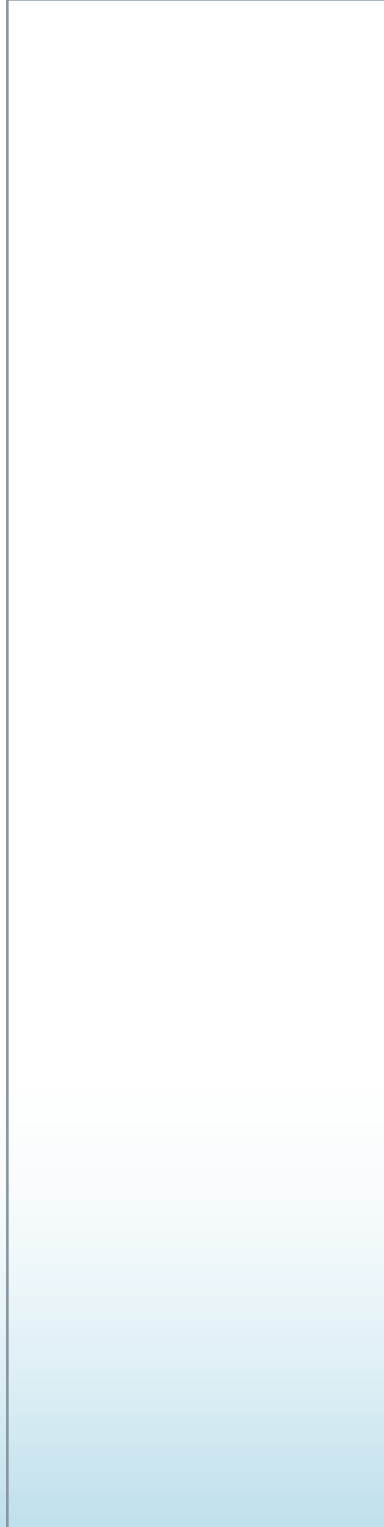
**Does that vary with different types of work?**

*Take a look at the charts you just made and sort the listed tasks into levels of energetic need:*

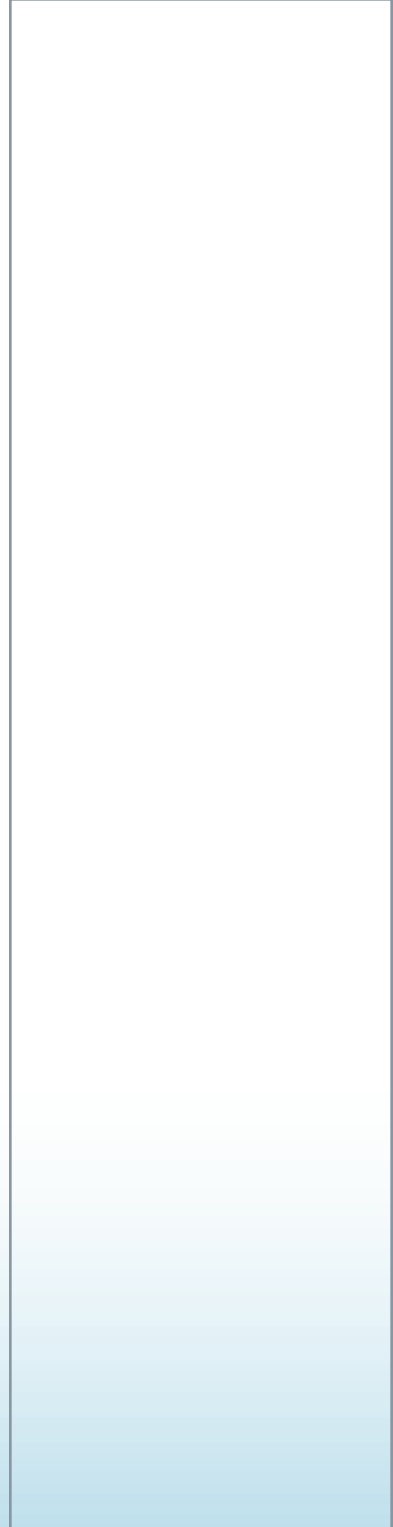
**A**

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for sorting tasks into level A.

**B**

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for sorting tasks into level B.

**C**

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for sorting tasks into level C.

# Securing Task to Time

While it can be great to have a grand, prioritized to-do list, it can be even more helpful to actually set those tasks to a specific time. This helps protect the time for important, fluid tasks, like writing or research, to secure them as priorities instead of giving that time away to other things.

Diagramming a weekly schedule can also help you plot those energy-intensive tasks for your best working hours, and also consider them in relation to other tasks or fixed priorities, like when your classes meet each week. Would it be difficult mentally change gears if you prep for one class right before you go in to teach different class?

And sometimes it takes some trial and error to learn how long you can concentrate and be sharp, or also, to learn how long it might take to do certain tasks. Some things end up taking longer than expected. Preparing activities, materials, and grading for class can often take a significant amount of time, especially for new teachers or when incorporating new modes of teaching, like the emergency move to digital platforms during quarantine. This can be a combination of learning the process it can get faster with more practice, but also of learning to constrain the amount of time allotted for the task, because time is finite and there are many other needs and responsibilities that also require attention.

It can be helpful to note how long various tasks take to get a sense of how long you are spending on it. This can help you build a schedule with more realistic time expectations, and also help you see where you might need to develop new approaches or systems so that a task takes less time.

*Scheduling things to specific time can help secure them as priorities that don't get forgotten, and/or constrain tasks from overtaking everything else. But then life happens, or things take longer than you expected. So there is a tension between planning and flexibility; no right way except the one that works for you. Approach the schedule as a work-in-progress, one that adjusts with you as you learn more and as life evolves.*



Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
7:00							
8:00							
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
1:00							
2:00							
3:00							
4:00							
5:00							
6:00							
7:00							
8:00							
9:00							

## The Eisenhower Box

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	<b>DO</b> <i>Do it now.</i>	<b>DECIDE</b> <i>Schedule a time to do it</i>
NOT IMPORTANT	<b>DELEGATE</b> <i>Who can do it for you?</i>	<b>DELETE</b> <i>Eliminate it.</i>

“What is important is seldom urgent,  
and what is urgent is seldom important.”

– Dwight Eisenhower, 34th US President



# Procrastination & Attention Management

*“I know what I need to do, but why am still not doing it?”*

Procrastination can be something that we do as a protective action to avoid something scary about a task. Or it can be the fallacy of “waiting for inspiration to strike.” Or it could be overwhelm from a task feeling too big. One example might be balancing research and teaching class during a semester. It can sometimes be easier to let the urgency of seeing students each week overtake the less-structured work of doing research and writing. Teaching and research are both important, but sometimes more fluid work gets left behind because of a lack of urgency. Or worse, the immediate pressure of emails can be a big time consumer, that holds a range of importance but much of it is often less important things. Urgency doesn't always correlate with importance, so it is important to consider both.

One way to help decide priority is to utilize the Eisenhower box to think about what is important and what can wait or even be completely eliminated. (See previous page.)

*Action Precedes Motivation.* ([NYT article](#)) so sometimes, it is helpful to just start working. That can mean breaking a larger task into smaller, concrete pieces, or it can be an agreement with yourself to work on it for a small, set amount of time, such one unit of the Pomodoro method.

The [Pomodoro Method](#) breaks time into small, finite chunks, which help make a task more manageable and build in regular breaks. It can help with focus when you know that it is a set time, and can also help you get a sense of how long tasks take. Set a timer to work for a 25 minute interval followed by a 3-5 minute break. Then repeat several such work/break intervals before taking a longer 15-20 minute break after about 4 intervals. (Variations with different time lengths exist, one version suggests 90 minute work intervals.)

# The Long Game

While short-range planning on a daily and weekly basis can be very useful, a different sense of perspective can be gained from looking at a longer range, to think of your broader plans for the future. One way is to **make a 2-year plan.**

This can be especially helpful to to reorient priorities towards larger goals. Which can get lost when time gets unstructured, like when you get past coursework or when global pandemic jangles your regularly scheduled programming. Here are some points to consider while making your plan:

## **Decide what counts as markers of progress for you.**

What are your career goals?

Are they in/out of the academy?

How can you balance preparing for both?

Come up with a 3-5 year plan to graduation/beyond

What are your research goals?

What are the steps you can take to achieve them?

What's the timeline?

Come up with a teaching plan toward graduation/beyond

What would you like to teach before you graduate?

Where can you teach it?

Can you teach your research somewhere?

What other obligations map onto this plan?

WAC? Other fellowship? Jobs? Family?

**Be realistic--what's a stretch goal and what's do-able? Include both!**

**Consider your work/life boundaries.** Does that mean having evenings and weekends set aside for things other than work? Does that mean remembering to make time eat lunch during the day? While there may be moments of intensity or deadlines, remembering that it is a marathon and not a sprint can help make things more sustainable in the long run. One approach is to have clearly delineated times and routines for when the work day starts and stops, such as Cal Newport's [Fixed-Schedule Productivity](#).

# Getting Unstuck



This workbook offers a variety of approaches to understanding and organizing the complex needs and responsibilities we face. Please feel free to use and adapt what is helpful and ignore the rest.

But sometimes, in spite of best intentions, we still get stuck, so here are a few things that might help you get unstuck:

Try another method.

Take a walk.

Talk to a mentor/colleague/friend.

Write a letter to yourself about it.

# Resources

## GRADUATE CENTER RESOURCES:

### Teaching and Learning Center

- Teach@CUNY Handbook
- Visible Pedagogy
  - *Teaching Your Own Research: First-Year Teachers in the Sciences*
- Workshops

### Wellness Center

- Dissertation Support Group/Master's Thesis Support Group

### Office of Career Planning & Professional Development:

- offers workshops and support on career planning

### GC Writing Center

- offers one-on-one feedback on your writing

### SELECTED BOOKS:

Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*

Robert Boice, *Advice for New Faculty Members*

Joan Bolker, *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*

Joli Jensen, *Write No Matter What*

Karen Kelsky, *The Professor Is In*

James Lang, *Small Teaching*

David Sternberg, *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation*

Helen Sword, *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*

Sword's article "[Write Every Day!': A Mantra Dismantled](#)"

### ONLINE RESOURCES:

Tanya Golash-Boza: <http://getalifephd.blogspot.com/>

Raul Pacheco-Vega: <http://www.raulpacheco.org/resources/academic-writing-acwri/>

Discussion and support for finishing dissertations: <http://www.phinished.org/>

[HASTAC Progressive Pedagogy Group](#)

[NYT on procrastination and attention management](#)

Bullet Journal: <http://bulletjournal.com>

Cal Newport, *Beyond To-Do Lists*: <http://www.calnewport.com/blog/2020/04/17/beyond-to-do-lists/>,

Cal Newport, *Fixed-Schedule Productivity*: <https://www.calnewport.com/blog/2008/02/15/fixed-schedule-productivity-how-i-accomplish-a-large-amount-of-work-in-a-small-number-of-work-hours/>

Pomodoro Technique: (definitely take an internet search to see many more articles about this) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro Technique](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro_Technique)

