
Learning management: time management and planning

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Recommended minimum time required: 0.5 hours



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Introduction

Preparing a thesis project follows a process that starts by establishing an aim, which can turn it into an ambitious piece of work that will need to be structured and planned in different phases. For this reason, time management is essential.

Before starting this topic, the characteristics involved in time management need to be presented, such as, for example:

1) There is a distinction between efficiency and effectiveness, and the combination of both will make you successful:

- **Effectiveness** is focused on achieving the desired goal.
- **Efficiency** involves doing things in the most appropriate manner and is focused on the method.

2) It is better to concentrate and focus **on a single task** rather than “multi-tasking”.

3) There is never enough time to do everything that you have to do, so you need to **prioritise and choose**.

4) It is possible to plan almost everything.

5) We are not aware of “how” we lose time.

6) A lot of activity will guarantee you good results.

7) Being responsible is not the same as working many hours.

Therefore, there are two challenges to face, in addition to supervising academic work itself, which are:

- Being able to plan in order to effectively supervise the different phases and sub-phases involved in research work.
- Efficiently managing the time that is required to do it.

“I never think of the future. It comes soon enough”. Albert Einstein

1. Time management applied to thesis projects

When speaking about time management for a thesis project, this means by:

- Being aware of how time is used by objectively analysing how it is being used and, consequently, seeing which aspects are open to improvement.
- Making a good plan.
- Making quick decisions.
- Establishing a routine: e.g. by dedicating certain hours and days to revising the submitted work and establishing regular meeting times with your PhD student.
- Establishing priorities: distinguishing between what is urgent or important, and those tasks which can wait.
- Anticipating potential unexpected events.
- Optimising the use of resources.

All of this involves performing an objective work analysis and re-education when it comes to habits (Ballenato, 2007) as well as learning about the different tools and resources for time management.

1.1. How do you manage different timescales involved in each project?

Ballenato (2007, pp. 51-55) suggests a time management analysis strategy to see if there are significant differences between the planned time and the actual time taken.

He suggests designing a log sheet which takes into account the following items:

Time	Activity	PT	TT	%	Description	Source-Causes	Suggestions

a) Note down every activity that you will carry out.

- b) Note the planned time (PT) that you believe it will take to complete each activity.
- c) Note down the start time.
- d) Record the time that it was finished.
- e) Record the actual time taken (TT).
- f) Compare PT with TT (in %). (PT/TT. 100)
- g) Describe the difficulties you experienced while carrying out the activity.
- h) Analyse the source and causes of any digression from it.
- i) Note ideas to resolve the difficulty.

Example

Time	Activity	PT	TT	%	Description	Source-Causes	Suggestions
09:00	Supervision	60 mins	95 mins	63%	Interruptions	Incoming email and text messages	Manage emails later. Put handset in "do not disturb" mode
	Total	60 mins	95 mins	63%			

With that, you can then make a more realistic and effective plan.

1.2. Relevance pyramid

As is often witnessed in our professional lives, as well as our personal lives, we usually act based on how important, relevant or urgent an activity, a meeting or a task may be.

We often give many aspects or tasks more urgency that they actually require due to work pressures.

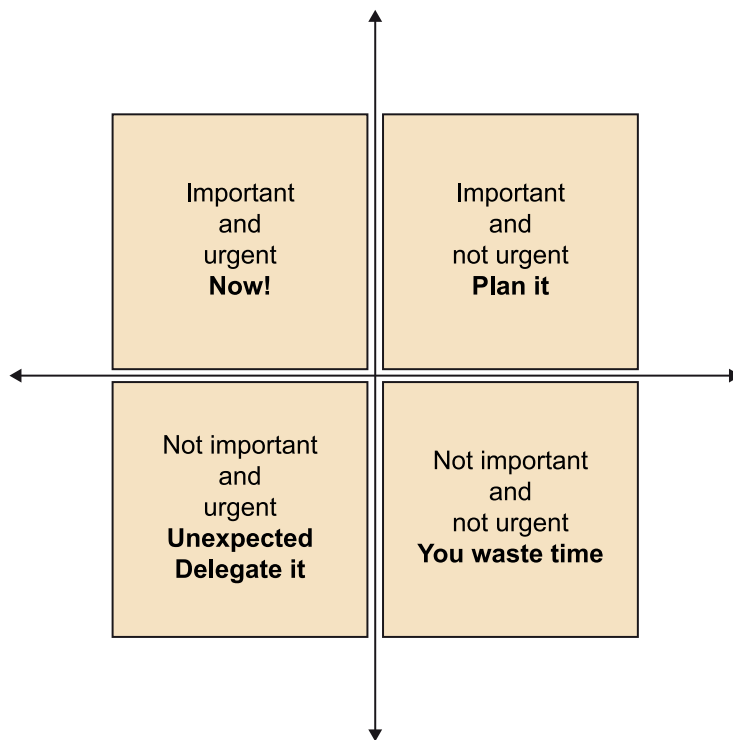
Based on this concept, the following pyramid represents a scale to enable the classification and better management of issues that fall into your hands:



- **Urgent:** It can't wait and needs immediate action. It relates to problems.
- **Important:** It affects the established main objective. It relates to opportunities.
- **Priority:** Everything can't be tackled at the same time, so you need to focus on those tasks that are truly a priority at any given moment in time. You have to choose and focus on it.
- **Can it be delegated?:** We usually take on actions that can be delegated. Sometimes, it is hard to properly delegate a task.
- **It can wait for 48 hours:** There are times when a certain number of issues all pile up at once. Separate out those that can truly wait.
- **It needs to be delivered:** This refers to something that has to be delivered. However, in the event that there are issues that need to be attended to sooner, it is set aside with the idea of being noted to be dealt with on a set day.
- **Necessary:** Is it truly necessary to do this? Sometimes, we give ourselves tasks that actually don't need any attention or time, and they are usually left in an action tray at the corner of our desks to be done later and yet are never done.

Another way of managing productivity (time and tasks) is via a personal management matrix based on what is important/urgent, as proposed by Covey (1989).

This matrix contains two dimensions of important/not important (something that affects the objectives) and urgent/non-urgent (it requires or does not require immediate attention).



- **Important and urgent:** Tasks and issues to be dealt with, without delay! E.g. Submission dates that can't be appealed. By being in this square, it involves a psychological cost. It gives you the feeling of "fighting fires".
- **Important and not urgent:** Aligned with your objective but does not require immediate attention. These tasks are usually a trap as you leave them, then they suddenly become important and urgent. You need to plan them e.g. supervision tasks with the PhD student. You have to dedicate more time to this square, and you do that by taking time away from the other two inferior squares (not important/urgent and not important/not urgent). It is a proactive square.
- **Not important and urgent:** You believe that they are urgent but they are not important. They make you lose time. E.g. Unexpected calls, pressure, interruptions.

Reflection

Based on the pyramid or the matrix, think about the different tasks you have at the moment, and on the basis of the explanation given, think of better ways of doing them.

- **Not important and not urgent:**...but you carry on doing them. They also mean you lose time. E.g. You are distracted by an issue that doesn't contribute anything.

1.3. Time thieves when focused on the review process

Time thieves are those factors, people, actions, circumstances or habits that cause a delay when carrying out tasks. They prevent you from carrying out your objectives or activities in an efficient manner.

There is no point in listing all of the possible time thieves as we each have our own interruptions and, in addition, they also depend on the work context and the people involved.

Among the most common are the following:

1) **The greatest thieves:** These relate to “incorrect time allocation to tasks” (Riesco, 2007).

These can apply to the log suggested in point 1.1. of this module.

2) **Lesser thieves:**

a) **internal:**

- Procrastination (as seen in module 3).
- Doing several tasks at the same time (multitasking).
- Lack of planning.
- Lack of motivation.
- Low level of personal discipline.
- A messy workplace.
- Stress.
- Worries.
- Indecisiveness.
- Not delegating.
- Not knowing when to say no (e.g. being interrupted when you have maximum concentration).

b) **external:**

- Telephone calls.
- Emails.
- Meetings.
- Interruptions.
- Excessive admin.
- Visual or auditory distractions.

- Socialising.
- Ineffective communication.

By applying the Pareto principle in time management, it could be said that out of 80% of tasks and results obtained, we carry them out in 20% of work time.

Given this, we're going to optimise that time by counteracting the most common lesser thieves:

1) **Emails:** Reserve a dedicated time in the day to open emails and answer them. Delete those that are of no interest, archive the important ones and those that can wait, and respond to the urgent ones.

2) **Mobile phone:** Switch it off or place it in "do not disturb" mode so that only priority calls will get through. Filter incoming calls. Make a list of outgoing calls and give yourself a time when you will make them.

3) **Scheduled meetings:** Calculate the time needed and adjust it as far as possible. Don't beat around the bush and seek effective communication.

4) **Meetings:** only schedule those that are necessary; keep to an agenda and prepare documentation beforehand.

5) **Admin:** establish a time of day dedicated to admin tasks.

6) **Environment:** Create the most pleasant environment possible (furniture). An efficient environment will make you more productive (organised and customised desk, wall).

Activity

Make a list where you reflect on:

- 1) your time thieves,
- 2) their causes,
- 3) and how to alleviate them.

1.4. Techniques

Based on the previous points, in which tools have also been given and explained in order to improve productivity, the following can also be added:

1) **Create** your own pyramid based on your relevant work by using, for example, a visible planner with labels or coloured sticky notes, computer alerts, and the use of different tools and applications on offer such as:

- **Getting Things Done (GTD):** This can be shared across different devices and allows you to plan tasks.
- **Toggl:** This is useful as it allows you to work collaboratively. It measures the time it takes for you to do tasks that you have previously entered into it.
- **Rescue time:** This is focused on helping you to eliminate your time thieves.

2) **Plan:** what you're going to do, with "true" short, medium and long-term goals.

3) **Schedule:** When and assign what resources are required.

4) **For reports or "paperwork":**

- a) Remove and sort through those documents that are unnecessary.
- b) Use the bin as much as possible: we tend to keep everything.
- c) Work on just one thing and keep your desk clear so that you focus on just that one task.
- d) While you are working, deactivate any notifications and close your email account.

5) **Encourage the use of:** alerts, diaries, applications, voice memos, planners, index cards per issue, blackboard, office materials.

6) **Personal performance level:** Each person has their own level of performance throughout the day. Tackle complicated tasks at your most productive time and leave those tasks that are more "mechanical" or less laborious for when you are more tired.

7) Dedicate a "particular" time for difficult tasks, as those are the ones where we tend to procrastinate the most.

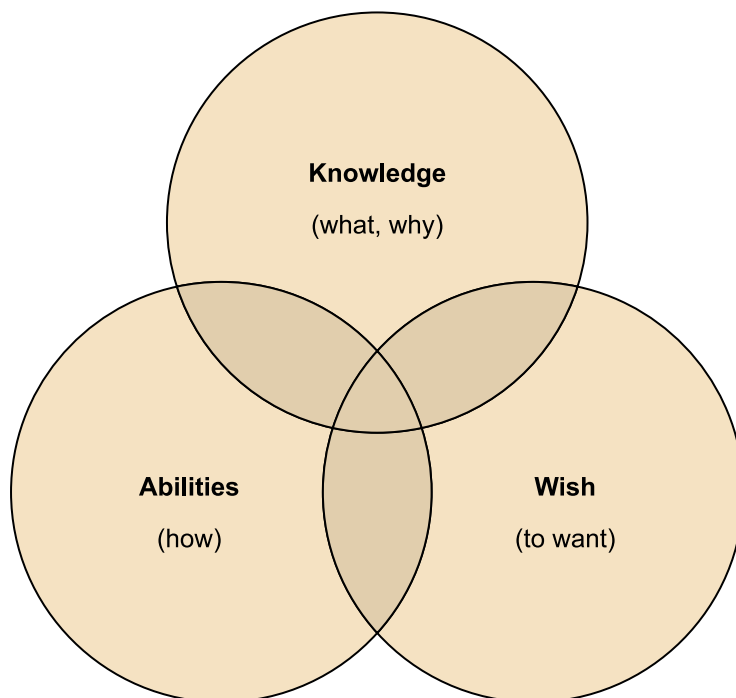
2. Planning that is aimed at the thesis

Within your thesis work planning, not only must you establish a timetable for planning your own thesis tasks, but also create a schedule with time slots dedicated to the PhD student.

Additionally, the PhD student must adopt the habit of sitting down to write it, to avoid experiencing “blank page syndrome”.

Learning to plan and work on a process of a thesis project involves nothing more than acquiring some habits that allow you to move forward in this task.

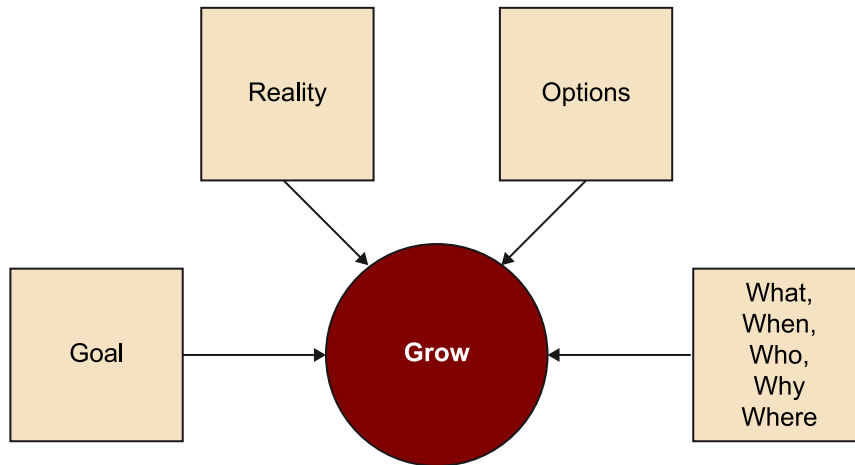
According to Covey (1989), habits fall under the scope of internalised behavioural principles and steps that are found at the intersection of the 3 graphic elements:



In the case of “desire”, this would take into account their vocation within the professional field.

All planning involves a series of pre-planned phases that can be aligned with the GROW model applied during the Coaching sessions, created by Alexander during the 1980s and publicised by Whitmore (1992).

The GROW method consists of:



- **Goal:** Aim. Establishing the aims to be developed throughout the project. Within these aims, micro goals can be created.
- **Reality:** This relates to the present time. This examines what point you've reached, reality and the current situation in order to tackle the project and having an awareness of it.
- **Options:** Strategies to be developed in order to provide motivation towards its achievement and overcome any possible limitations or problems that are encountered.
- **5W:** We're going to develop the action plan in this phase.

2.1. Serious questions to focus PhD students

To focus PhD students, you need to listen to them and ask them questions.

Suitable questions can become serious questions if they have an impact on the person, if they are directed in an appropriate way and at the appropriate time.

According to Robbins (2007), the aim of asking serious questions is to:

- 1) Shift the focus of attention.
- 2) Change the resources that are available.

A serious question (Adams, 2009):

- Generates curiosity.
- Encourages reflection.
- Opens the door to new possibilities.
- Creates action.

- Focuses the attention.
- Empowers and bestows responsibility.
- Raises more questions.

For different moments in time, you should create a list of possible questions based on what the author of the thesis has explained, the stage of production they are at, and the problems that they are experiencing, both on an academic and personal level.

Examples of questions:

1) To reconnect it with their work:

- If you are not sure up to now, how far should you go?
- What would you like to have written up to now?
- If you had a magic wand... what would you ask for in order to be able to carry on?

2) To help them to change their perspective:

- What can be learnt from all of this?
- It would only be perfect if you...
- Could it be done differently?
- What do you value most about your current point of view?
- What skills has this situation given you?

3) For being aware:

- Is there any connection between what we are discussing and your values or principles?
- What is stopping you from moving forward when you're faced with a blank sheet?
- Do you listen to yourself? Did you hear what you just said?
- What results are you hoping to obtain from what you are doing?
- What are the advantages of doing/not doing this?

- In what way does this contribute to your life? What does it give you? What are you getting out of it?

- Has the problem been clearly set out?

4) To generate action:

- What would happen if you did it like this? And what about if you didn't?
- What must you stop doing?
- What can you come up with if you had to do it to prepare yourself?
- What would bring you closer to your aim?
- What is the worst that could happen?

5) To establish aims:

- What is your main motivation?
- What deadline do you want to be given?
- What do you want to achieve with that?
- If there is no hypothesis, are the aims clear? Are they achievable? (Rodenés, Chismol, Arango, 2000).

6) To design an action plan:

- What are you relying upon in order to achieve your goal right now?
- What do you need?
- What would be your first step?
- What do you need to do in order to find out what the first step is?
- Who could help you with this topic?
- What obstacles might you come across?

7) To generate solutions:

- If you were listening to yourself, what advice would you give?

- It sounds interesting... tell me more.
- What question would you like to ask?

8) To spur on action:

- When are you going to start?
- Why do you want...?
- What could you do to...?

9) When faced with an unsatisfactory situation:

- What has happened? What happened?
- What was the challenge?
- What could you or should you do to recover the situation?
- What have you learnt?

10) For any other time:

- What consequences would there be for the thesis if...? (Rodenes, Chismol, Arango, 2000).
- What do you understand by...?
- Why do you want...?
- What is it that you're hoping to achieve?

Recommended reading

It is recommended that you read the article: M. Rodenes; R. Chismol; M. D. Arango (2000). "Un enfoque sistemático para realizar la tesis doctoral". [A systematic focus for completing a doctoral thesis]. *Psicothema* (vol. 12, no, 2, pp. 474-478).

2.2. Creating aims when preparing a thesis

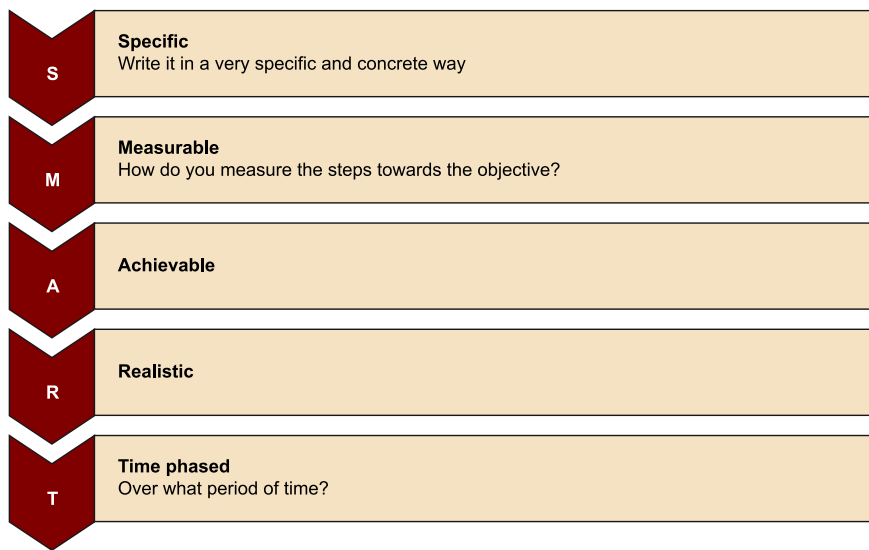
A thesis contains the definition of a general aim and certain specific aims. Going beyond these and the aims of the thesis itself, the aims for working at different stages involved in the research process need to be constructed.

To formulate these aims, a series of minimum requirements need to be met:

- 1) Its wording is formulated in a positive way.

- 2) The completion time is realistic.
- 3) Potential limitations and things that could interfere have been defined.
- 4) Resources are sought.
- 5) It is organic: it is coherent with the PhD students beliefs and aims and it considers the interpersonal context.

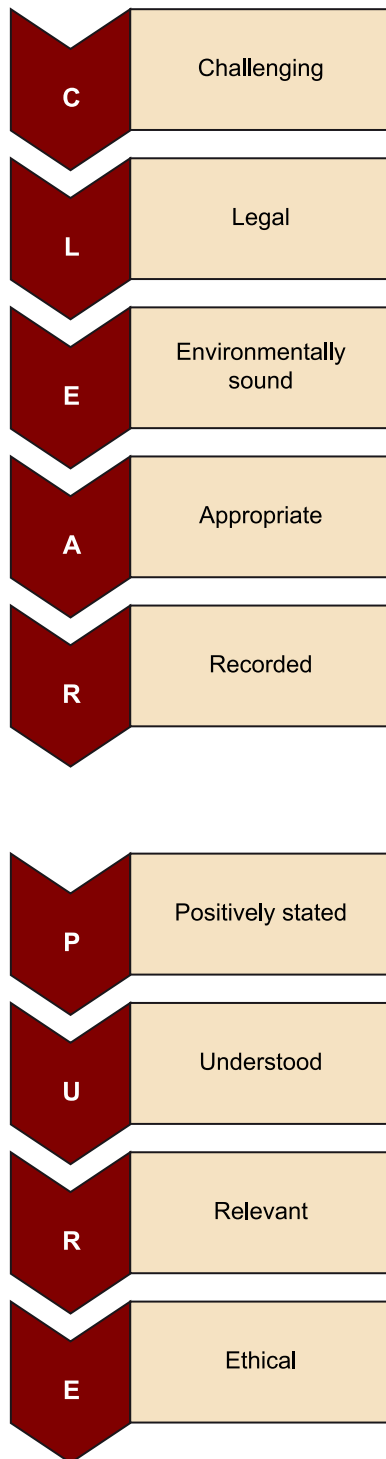
In addition, the aim must be constructed in such a way that it meets the following criteria:



That it is SMART which means that:

- It is truly tangible, that it can be carried out, that it can be done and it specifies the 'what', 'how' and 'when'.
- You have to analyse if the project's idea is truly achievable in the time allowed, and whether it is viable.
- Bearing in mind that there is a cost in time (that will have to be managed) as well as other factors, they may have to give up on some and analyse if there will be consequences and what type these are.

It must also be borne in mind that it must meet:



Once the aim and even the micro goals that go with it have been established, you can move on to creating the action plan.

2.3. Action plans based on aims

By creating an action plan, whether jointly between the supervisor and the PhD student or by the PhD student under the watchful eye of the supervisor, it offers benefits in being able to properly monitor the aspects to be achieved

through the effective supervision of each area and various indicators, which reinforces the various steps that will be taken to carry out the issue to be worked upon.

To design an action plan, its characteristics must be considered:

- 1) It needs to be clear so that each one of the steps are clear.
- 2) Each step has to be very specific and detailed.
- 3) Each action and step that is taken has to be done gradually and in sequence.
- 4) It needs to be adapted and must fit each thesis and each PhD student.
- 5) It needs to contain a schedule for the things to be done and their timescales.

As well as taking into account the template in module 2, section 7, another example might be:

Topic to work on:		
Aim or micro-goals:		
Timetable:		
Actions to be carried out:	Success indicators	Review

There is a guideline (5W2H) for creating an action plan that can be considered in accordance with the aim that you are formulating:

- **What** What has to be done?
- **Why** Why?
- **Where** Where? Online, offline?
- **When** When? For how long?
- **Who** Who are the people responsible for it and who is participating?
- **How** What methodology will be used? What processes?
- **How much** What is the budget for the project?

With all of this, as has already been said, it means making an action plan that is best adapted to the needs of the work objective.

“If the plan doesn’t work, change the plan but don’t change the goal”. Anonymous