

# THE PROCRASTINATION EQUATION

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How to Stop Putting Things Off  
and Start Getting Stuff Done

PIERS STEEL



RANDOM HOUSE CANADA

## CHAPTER ONE

# Portrait of a Procrastinator

*“Never put off till tomorrow,  
what you can do the day after tomorrow.”*

MARK TWAIN

**T**his book is about every promise you made to yourself but broke. It is about every goal you set but let slide, never finding the motivation. It is about diets postponed, late-night scrambles to finish projects, and disappointed looks from the people who depend on you—or from the one you see in the mirror. It is about being the slacker in your family and the straggler in your circle of friends. It is about that menacing cloud of uncompleted chores, from the late bill payments to the clutter that fills your home. It is about that doctor’s appointment you have been putting off and the finances still in disarray. It is about dawdling, delay, opportunity lost, and more. Much more. This book is also about the *other* side, the moments of action when procrastination gives way to crystal clarity and attention, work is devoured without hesitation, and giving up never even occurs

to you. It is about personal transformation, about unencumbered desire free of internal competition, and the guiltless leisure you can enjoy when your daily tasks are done. This book is about potential, wasted and fulfilled; about dreams that fade into obscurity and dreams we can make come true. Best of all, this book is about shifting the rest of your life away from putting it off to getting it done.

The pivot point that tips us away from accomplishing what we want and need to do is procrastination. It isn't a question of laziness, although the two are easily confused. Unlike the truly slothful, procrastinators want to do what they need to do—and usually do get around to it, but not without a lot of struggle. I will show that this dillydallying is in part hereditary, and that we are hardwired to delay. Our tendency to put things off took a hundred million years to form and is now almost etched into our being. But research shows that, despite its ingrained nature, we can modify our habits and change this behavior. Procrastinators who understand the processes behind their inaction can master them and become less stressed about their deadlines and more able to meet them.

This book tells procrastination's story. It stretches from Memphis of ancient Egypt to modern New York City, from the cancer ward to the stock market floor. I hope to enlighten you about why we procrastinate, what comes of procrastination, and what strategies we can employ to do something about it. We will start off simply, establishing what procrastination is, helping you decide whether you are a procrastinator, and if so, how you likely experience a bout of procrastination. If you are a procrastinator—and the odds are good that you are—you are part of a very large community indeed. It is time we all got to know each other a little bit better.

## WHAT PROCRASTINATION IS AND ISN'T

There is so much confusion about procrastination that it is best to lay our subject bare on the dissecting table and start immediately separating the dilly from the dally. By procrastinating you are not just delaying, though delay is an integral part of what you are doing. Procrastination comes from the Latin *pro*, which means “forward, forth, or in favor of,” and *crastinus*, which means “of tomorrow.” But procrastination means so much more than its literal meaning. Prudence, patience, and prioritizing all have elements of delay, yet none means the same as procrastination. Since its first appearance in the English language in the sixteenth century, procrastination has identified not just any delay but an *irrational* one—that is, when we voluntarily put off tasks despite believing ourselves to be worse off for doing so. When we procrastinate, we know we are acting against our own best interests.

Still, you will find people mischaracterizing wise delays as procrastination. Seeing a co-worker stretched out in his office chair, arms crossed behind his head, relaxed, you ask what he is up to and get a cheerful response of “Me? I’m procrastinating!” But he isn’t. He is happily putting off a report because he knows there is a good chance that the project is going to be cancelled later this week, and if it isn’t, well, he can still definitely write it at the last minute anyway. This is smart. In this scenario, it is the person who compulsively has to finish everything as soon as possible who is irrational, tackling work even when it is destined to become irrelevant. The obsessive who completes every task at the first opportunity can be just as dysfunctional as the procrastinator who leaves everything to the last moment. Neither one is scheduling time intelligently.

Consequently, it isn’t procrastination if you fail to arrive at a party far earlier than everyone else or if you don’t get to the airport for your flight three hours in advance. By delaying a

little bit, you save awkward moments with your host, who is likely still getting things ready, and you will be spared uncomfortable hours at your gate waiting for your plane to take off. Neither is it procrastination to respond to emergencies by dropping (and putting off) everything else. Insisting that you should finish mowing the front lawn before attending to your house, which has just caught fire, isn't smart. Sure, you didn't put off trimming the grass, but the charred ruin of your home is too high a price to pay. Alternatively, flexibly adapting your schedule to respond to the pressing needs of a spouse or a child will likely save you from ruining your family. Not everything can happen at once; it is in your choice of what to do now and what to delay that procrastination happens, not in delay itself.

### **YOU THE PROCRASTINATOR**

Now that we understand what procrastination is, do you practice it? Where do you land in the ranks of procrastination? Are you a garden-variety dillydallier or are you hardcore with “tomorrow” tattooed across your back? There are some entertaining methods that may reveal your propensity to procrastinate. To begin, check your handwriting. If it is sluggish and disjointed, it may indicate you are likewise. Alternatively, look to the stars . . . well, really the planets. Astrologers note that when Mercury is in retrograde or in opposition to Jupiter, procrastination tends to be on the uptick.<sup>1</sup> Or try a tarot card reading. The “Two of Swords” often indicates you are split with a dilemma and procrastinating on your decision. Personally, I prefer a more scientific approach.

You can go to my website, [www.procrastinus.com](http://www.procrastinus.com), for a comprehensive test that I've administered to tens of thousands of subjects, and compare your level of irrational delay with those of individuals around the world. However, if time is pressing and you wish not to delay, you might try the shorter quiz provided

below. Complete the mini-version here by circling your response to each of these nine items and then calculating the total. Note that questions 2, 5, and 8 are scored in the opposite direction from the other items:

	VERY SELDOM OR NOT TRUE OF ME	SELDOM TRUE OF ME	SOMETIMES TRUE OF ME	OFTEN TRUE OF ME	VERY OFTEN TRUE OR TRUE OF ME
.....					
1.	I delay tasks beyond what is reasonable.				
	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I do everything when I believe it needs to be done.				
	5	4	3	2	1
3.	I often regret not getting to tasks sooner.				
	1	2	3	4	5
4.	There are aspects of my life that I put off, though I know I shouldn't.				
	1	2	3	4	5
5.	If there is something I should do, I get to it before attending to lesser tasks.				
	5	4	3	2	1
6.	I put things off so long that my well-being or efficiency unnecessarily suffers.				
	1	2	3	4	5
7.	At the end of the day, I know I could have spent the time better.				
	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I spend my time wisely.				
	5	4	3	2	1
9.	When I should be doing one thing, I will do another.				
	1	2	3	4	5
.....					

**TOTAL SCORE** \_\_\_\_\_

SCORE	COMPARED TO EVERYONE ELSE	
19 or less	You are in the bottom 10%	Your mantra is “first-things-first”
20-23	You are in the bottom 10-25%	
24-31	You are in the middle 50%	Average procrastinator
32-36	You are in the top 10-25%	
37 or more	You are in the top 10%	Tomorrow is your middle name

Where did you end up? Are you legendary for leaving things to the last minute or do you only put off exercising and taxes, like almost everyone else?

### PROCRASTINATION POLKA

The higher you scored on that procrastination test, the greater the chance that you are procrastinating right now. Certain other tasks should be occupying your attention—which sadly means you have better things to do than reading this book. These tasks are likely unpleasant, possibly administrative and boring, and perhaps difficult to visualize as being successfully accomplished. Let me make a few guesses about what is on your plate:

- Is your laundry basket overflowing?
- Are there dirty dishes in the sink?
- Do your smoke detectors need new batteries?
- How about your car battery? What is the air pressure in your tires and how long has it been since the last oil change?
- Isn't there a ticket to book, a room to reserve, a bag to pack, a passport to renew?
- Have you informed your boss about your vacation plans?
- Have you bought a gift for that upcoming birthday?
- Have you filled out your time sheets, performance reviews, and expense reports?
- Did you hold that difficult conversation with the employee whose work is not up to par?

- Have you scheduled the meeting you are dreading?
- What about the big project your boss gave you? Are you making progress?
- Did you make it to the gym this week?
- Have you called your mom?

How does that list strike you? You can add to it, of course. Even if I didn't score a direct hit, you were likely procrastinating somewhere else, pushing a task into the future. On its own, each of these postponed tasks has few repercussions. Together, they can culminate in misery by nibbling away at your life. The major project, the one with the hard deadline, is the mother of all such concerns; it can keep you awake at night and make it difficult to accomplish any of the other tasks on your list. At one time or another, we have *all* felt motivationally marooned and unable to get around to the report, the research, the writing, the presentation to prep, or the exam to ace.

There is a common pattern to all procrastination and it goes something like this. At the start of a big project, time is abundant. You wallow in its elastic embrace. You make a few passes at getting down to it, but nothing makes you feel wholeheartedly engaged. If the job can be forgotten, you'll forget it. Then the day arrives when you really intend to get down to work; but suddenly it's just something you don't feel like doing. You can't get traction. Every time you try to wrap your mind around it, something distracts you, defeating your attempts at progress. So you forward your task to a date with more hours, only to find that every tomorrow seems to have the same twenty-four. At the end of each of these days, you face the disquieting mystery of where it went. This goes on for a while.

Eventually, time's limited nature reveals itself. Hours, once tossed carelessly away, become increasingly limited and precious. That very pressure makes it hard to get started. You want

to get going on the big project but instead you take on peripheral chores. You clean your office or clean up your e-mail; you exercise; you shop and cook. Part of you knows this isn't what you should be doing, and so you say to yourself, "I am doing this; at least I am preparing by doing something." Eventually, it is too late in the day to really get started, so you may as well go to bed. And the cycle of avoidance starts again with the dawn.

Sometimes, to quell your anxiety, you give in to total diversion. You take a moment to check your e-mail or the sports scores. From there, why not respond to a few messages or watch a few minutes of TV? Soon these temptations have seduced you. The task still waggles itself in the periphery of your vision, but you don't want to look it in the eye—it will have you if you look—so you burrow deeper into your distractions. You write long passionate comments on online forums, troll for news tidbits, or manically switch TV channels at the first ebb of interest. Pleasure turns to powerlessness as you become unable to extract yourself.

As the deadline approaches, you make the diversions more intense so that they will sufficiently distract you. Banishing anything that reminds you of the dreaded thing, you shun calendars and timepieces. In a willful distortion of reality, you shift your plans from what you once could solidly accomplish to what is minimally possible. When you should be working harder than ever, you are sleeping in, daydreaming of alternative worlds, of winning the lottery, of being anywhere but here. As anxiety mounts, you want immediate relief, escape, rewards—anything that gives you the illusion of safe harbor. If friends or relatives or co-workers try to separate you from your diversions, you meet them with an annoyed: "Just a minute! I'LL DO IT AFTER THIS!" Unfortunately, "this" never ends. Secretly, you are full of self-recrimination and self-doubt, envious of those who simply get things done.

Energy builds until finally a threshold is crossed and something clicks. You start working. Some inner mind has quietly boiled the task down to its essence, as there are no more moments to spare. You wade into the work, making ruthless decisions and astonishing progress. In place of that menacing cloudiness, a glittering clarity comes over you. There is purity to your work, fueled by the real urgency of now or never. For a lucky few, this surge of efficiency will enable them to get the project done. For others, this initial rush wanes before the cursed thing is completed. After too many hours of sleepless concentration, brains shut down. Caffeine and sugar only offer an unsatisfying buzz. Tick, tock . . . the time has run out. You limp across the finish line with insufficient preparation, giving the world your second best.

This is so common as to be unremarkable—except to the person who has suffered through the experience and knows the performance was not up to par. The relief at getting a job done doesn't always make up for doing a sloppy job. Even if you managed to perform brilliantly, the achievement is tainted with a whiff of what might have been. And this kind of procrastination has likely cast a cloud on an evening out, a party, or a vacation, which you couldn't fully enjoy because half of your mind was elsewhere, obsessing about what you were avoiding. You resolve that this will never happen again; the cost of procrastination is too great.

The trouble with such resolutions is that procrastination is a habit that tends to endure. Instead of dealing with our delays, we excuse ourselves from them—self-deception and procrastination often go hand-in-hand.<sup>2</sup> Exploiting the thin line between *couldn't* and *wouldn't*, we exaggerate the difficulties we faced and come up with justifications: a bad chest cold, an allergic reaction that caused sleepiness, a friend's crisis that demanded

our attention. Or we deflect responsibility entirely by saying, “Gee whiz, who knew?” If you couldn’t have anticipated the situation, then you can’t be blamed. For example, how would you respond to the following questions regarding your last bout of procrastination?

- Did you know the task was going to take so long?
- Did you realize that the consequences of being late were so dire?
- Could you have expected that last-minute emergency?

The honest answers are likely yes, yup, and definitely, but it’s difficult to answer honestly, isn’t it? And that is the problem.

Some procrastinators will even try to frame their self-destructive inaction as a thoughtful choice. For example, is it wrong to put off your career to pursue more family time? It depends on who you are. Some people relish the work-focused model of success, resenting time taken away from the job, and so they may miss out on family dinners and school plays. Others prosper in the home and community, enjoying the relationships nurtured there, at the expense of tasks at work. To the casual observer, it isn’t easy to tell which choice is procrastination and which is a purposeful decision. Only the procrastinator knows for sure.

In the back of their minds, many procrastinators hope they won’t need excuses. They bank on Lady Luck. Sometimes it works. Frank Lloyd Wright drew his architectural masterpiece, Fallingwater, in the three hours before his patron, Edgar Kaufmann, came to see the sketches. Tom Wolfe cranked out in a midnight panic forty-nine pages of almost unedited prose for an *Esquire* magazine piece on California’s hotrod and custom car culture. Byron Dobell, his editor, simply removed “Dear Byron” from the top of Wolfe’s memo and printed it under

the title “There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby,” and a new style of journalism was born. But I don’t need to tell you how rare such outcomes are. By your own standards, if you thought delay was a good idea in the first place, you wouldn’t be procrastinating.

### THE PROCRASTINATOR’S PROFILE

If it makes you feel any better, procrastination puts us in good company. It’s as common as morning coffee. Across scores of surveys, about 95 percent of people admit to procrastinating, with about a quarter of these indicating that it is a chronic, defining characteristic.<sup>3</sup> “To stop procrastinating” is at any time among the world’s top reported goals.<sup>4</sup> Procrastination is so prevalent that it has its own brand of humor. Possibly the best excuse for missing a deadline came from Dorothy Parker. When asked by *The New Yorker’s* editor, Harold Ross, for a piece that was late, she woefully explained, using her dark and sorrowful eyes to full effect, “Somebody was using the pencil.” And, of course, there is the most infamous of all procrastination jokes. Don’t you know it? I will tell you later.

No occupational category seems immune from procrastination, but writers seem especially prone. Agatha Christie was guilty of it and Margaret Atwood admitted she often spends “the morning procrastinating and worrying, and then plunges into the manuscript in a frenzy of anxiety around 3:00 p.m.” Newscasters can also suffer from it; witness Ted Koppel’s quip: “My parents and teachers used to be exasperated by the fact I would wait until the last minute, and now people are fascinated by it.”<sup>5</sup> Procrastinators come from every letter of the occupational alphabet, from astronauts to Episcopalian priests and from X-ray technicians to zookeepers.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, whatever the job, procrastinators are more likely to be unemployed or working

part-time compared to their non-procrastinating counterparts. Procrastinators can be of either sex, though the Y chromosome has a slight edge. A group of a hundred hardened procrastinators would likely be composed of 54 men and 46 women, leaving 8 unmatched males vying for a female dalliance. You see, procrastinators tend to be available . . . sort of. They are more likely to be single than married but also more likely to be separated than divorced. They put off ending as well as beginning commitment. Age also determines procrastination.<sup>7</sup> As we progress from grade school through to the retirement home and the closer we come to life's final deadline, the less we put off. Those who have matured physically are, unsurprisingly, more mature in character.

This demographic exploration, though interesting, isn't as useful as identifying procrastinators by their psychological profile. There is indeed a core trait explaining why we put off, but it might not be what you have heard. It is commonly thought that we delay because we are perfectionists, anxious about living up to sky-high standards.<sup>8</sup> This perfectionist theory of procrastination sounds good and even feels good. Perfectionism can be a desirable trait, as shown by the canned response to the interview question, "What is your biggest weakness?" When Bill Rancic was asked that question just before winning the first season of Donald Trump's *The Apprentice*, he replied, "I'm too much of a perfectionist; it's a flaw," prompting his interviewer to interject, "Being a perfectionist is a good thing; it means you keep striving." But the perfectionism-procrastination theory doesn't pan out. Based on tens of thousands of participants—it's actually the best-researched topic in the entire procrastination field—perfectionism produces a negligible amount of procrastination. When the counseling psychologist Robert Slaney developed the Almost Perfect Scale to measure perfectionism, he found that "perfectionists were *less* likely to procrastinate than

non-perfectionists, a result that contradicted the anecdotal literature.”<sup>9</sup> My research backs him up: neat, orderly, and efficient perfectionists don’t tend to dillydally.<sup>10</sup>

How, then, did we come to believe that perfectionism causes procrastination? Here is what happened. Perfectionists who procrastinate are more likely to seek help from therapists, so of course they turn up in clinical research about procrastination in greater numbers. Non-perfectionist procrastinators (and for that matter, non-procrastinating perfectionists) are less likely to seek professional help. Perfectionists are more motivated to do something about their failings because they are more likely to feel worse about whatever they are putting off. Consequently, it is not perfectionism that is the problem but the *discrepancy* between perfectionist standards and performance.<sup>11</sup> If you are a perfectionist and are suffering from high standards that are unachievable, you might want to do something about that too, but you will need an additional book: this one is about procrastination.

What is really the main source of procrastination? Thirty years of research and hundreds of studies have isolated several personality traits that predict procrastination, but one trait stands above the rest. The Achilles Heel of procrastination turns out to be *impulsiveness*; that is, living impatiently in the moment and wanting it all now.<sup>12</sup> Showing self-control or delaying gratification is difficult for those of us who are impulsive. We just don’t have much ability to endure short-term pain for long-term gain.<sup>13</sup> Impulsiveness also determines how we respond to task anxiety. For those of us who are less impulsive, anxiety is often an internal cue that gets us to start a project early, but for those who are more impulsive it is a different story: anxiety over a deadline will lead straight to procrastination.<sup>14</sup> The impulsive try to avoid an anxiety-provoking task temporarily or block it from their awareness, a tactic that

makes perfect sense if you're thinking short term. In addition, impulsiveness leads procrastinators to be disorganized and distractible or, as my colleague Henri Schouwenburg puts it, to suffer from “weak impulse control, lack of persistence, lack of work discipline, lack of time management skill, and the inability to work methodically.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, impulsive people find it difficult to plan work ahead of time and even after they start, they are easily distracted. Procrastination inevitably follows.

### **LOOKING FORWARD**

So there it is. Procrastination is pervasive. Almost as common as gravity and with an equal downward pull, it is with us from the overfull kitchen garbage can in the morning to the nearly empty tube of toothpaste at night. In the next chapter, I'll let you in on the research that has helped me understand why we delay things irrationally and why procrastination is so widespread. I'll reveal and explain the Procrastination Equation, a formula that shows the dynamics of this way of behaving, and then I'll tell you about the amazing opportunity I had to study this phenomenon in the real world. Subsequent chapters will describe the different elements that are at play in our minds and hearts, and then we'll look at the price of procrastination in our lives and in society at large. There's always a good side to the kind of research I present—within the causes we can also find the cures. So the last part of the book will offer ways in which individuals, bosses, teachers, and parents can improve their own motivation and motivate others, in the hope that procrastination will be less of a scourge. The final chapter pushes you to put these proven practices into your own life. The advice here is evidence-based, as scientifically vetted and pharmaceutically pure as it gets; it's the good stuff from behind the counter, so don't overdo it.

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