

YOU'RE IN CHARGE NOW

You're in college. You've got your class schedule, your stereo is set up, a stack of heavy and incredibly expensive books totters on your desk, and you're ready to go.

Now what?

College offers a great deal of freedom. You might be living away from home for the first time, with nobody to tell you when to go to bed, when to get up, when to straighten your room, when to take out the trash, when to do laundry, or when to leave for school. At college, nobody's going to check your homework every night, monitor your study habits, take you to the library to do research, or in a lot of cases, even check if you're in class.

Sounds great, right? All the freedom in the world! The problem is, if nobody's going to tell you to do all these things, you have to be responsible for them. After all, the work still has to get done, you still need to get some sleep, and -- if you'll allow me to cut straight to the heart of the matter -- nobody's going to want to sleep with you if you don't do laundry or maintain at

least a minimal degree of cleanliness in your personal hygiene and living space.

So it's time to get organized.

There's this myth that floats around that organized people are neither fun nor creative. It's a myth that's based on two whopping misconceptions: first, that "organized" means "anal retentive neat freak", and second, that artistic people are perpetually unorganized. Neither is true. You won't find a great painter whose brushes are scattered around haphazardly, or a great writer who sits down at the computer or typewriter without some outline of what she or he wants to write about.

Being organized doesn't mean having an obsessive need for hyper-cleanliness; all it means is that you know what you need to be doing, and where the stuff you need to do it is. It means not wasting time on stuff that doesn't matter, like trying to find an assignment that's due tomorrow or locking yourself out of your dorm room because you forgot your keys. It means staying calm, cool, and collected no matter what the world throws at you, because you know you've got a grip on what matters.

There are tons of books and websites you can turn to for information about getting organized, and when you have a chance, go ahead (I've listed some in the appendix to this book). But all you really need to do is develop a system for collecting and keeping track of all the stuff that enters your life, turning it into doable tasks, and doing them. Collect, process, do.

Sounds easy, huh?

Of course, you can make it very, very complicated, with specialized computer programs, complex filing systems, desktop trays, and the like, but you can start with a pocket-sized notebook, a pen or pencil, a box of manila file folders, a calendar, and some willpower.

You can use any notebook, but I recommend you get something like a Moleskine, which has a rigid, faux-leather binding. You want something durable enough to keep in your backpack or pocket, and nice enough that you will actually feel like using it. Moleskine makes a range of pocket notebooks, from sketch pads and watercolor pads to notebooks with graph paper to plain lined or unlined books -- pick whatever makes you comfortable.

Whatever you pick, keep it and a pen or pencil with you at all times. Whenever something comes up that you need to do, write it down on a right-hand page (or left, if you're left-handed) -- an assignment, a meeting, a date, a book you need to check out, whatever. Use the facing pages to record ideas (a line from a song you're writing, topics for papers, the title of a book or album you want to look up, an outline for a section of an essay you're writing, anything you want to remember). Whenever you have a free moment, check to see if there's anything you need to do. Once a week or so, go through and transfer any dated items, like an upcoming concert or a test date, to your calendar.

Just about any calendar will do, except for those page-a-day dealies that are only good for reminding you what day it is. A paper calendar has the advantage of being easily written on and looked through, while computerized calendars, whether on your PC like Outlook or some other PIM, on your phone, or online offer the ability to set up reminders and alarms, which can be incredibly useful.

Pick something that's comfortable for you, and check it religiously. At the beginning of the semester, go through your syllabuses and transfer any important dates into your calendar. If your calendar is electronic, set a reminder for a week earlier; on paper, put another entry a week ahead saying "x is due in one week". For really big projects, like research papers, put another reminder a few weeks ahead.

Break down big projects into small pieces and schedule those. For example, a term paper might require you to check out several books, read them, and write the paper. In your calendar, put "Look up six books (or however many) for term paper" about a month into the semester, schedule reading and taking notes on all the books over the next month or so, and schedule two or three weeks of writing time, with a final deadline a week or so before the paper is due.

Do yourself a favor and schedule most of this stuff on weekdays. Don't put yourself in a position where you have to choose between going to see a band with your friends and studying Freud's theory of sexual repression. It's entirely possible to do a full semester's work with only a little bit -- or none at all -- on weekends. If you must use weekends (maybe you have a job, or you're a grad student and your workload is staggering) try to schedule every other weekend for work, or only schedule work early in the day -- you actually do need to spend some time socializing and decompressing.

File Folders

Get a box of file folders -- plain manila ones are fine, or splurge on some fancy colored or printed ones -- and make up one folder for each class. Put your syllabus in there, and add notes, graded papers, handouts, and any other papers you create or receive in the class. ***Don't throw anything away until your grades are in!*** Professors make mistakes, and you need to be able to show a) your work, and b) the syllabus if you are going to challenge a grade you don't think you deserved.

Make up another folder for each major project -- term paper assignments, club activities, sports participation -- and put drafts, notes, article print-outs or photocopies, schedules, index cards, or anything else associated with the project into the folder. You should also have a folder for school administrative paperwork -- your class schedule, your degree requirements, and so on.

It doesn't matter what you keep these in -- a decent desktop

file box can be had for under \$10, a file stand for even less. Even a spare messenger bag will do the trick, as long as it fits everything for the school year in it. The idea is that you have one folder to take to each class, significantly lightening up your load as you move about campus. When you go to the library to work on a term paper, you grab the folder for that project - - you don't need all the notes from the class the term paper's for, so why lug them around?

Willpower

Adopting any system is going to take a little while, so make yourself very conscious of keeping to your system until it becomes second-nature. It's all pretty simple stuff, so it shouldn't take too long. If you feel yourself sliding, go back to basics: get out your notebook and start writing things down - - it won't take too long to get back into the groove of collecting, processing, and doing.

That's it! If you feel like using a DayPlanner or smartphone, and you trust yourself to use them regularly and stick with it, then by all means, do so. But given your lifestyle -- limited space, limited funds, and a schedule that's going to find you on the move a lot -- the simpler, the better. A few basic tools can help you keep it together so you can focus on the content of your classes, not on remembering when and where they are.

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