

Executive Function Toolbook



Introduction

Executive Function (EF) skills are imperative to success.

Executive function challenges are some of the most mentioned issues among college students. The EF Toolbook is dedicated to our increasingly neurodiverse student-body, those living with ADHD, anxiety, depression, and high stress levels.

We hope these techniques and tools can assist you in better managing your executive function needs.

Table of Contents

Prioritizing

Time-management

Learning, Studying, & Retaining

Self-Advocacy & Self-Care

Prioritizing

Tool 1: The Eisenhower Matrix (aka the Urgent-Important Matrix)

The Eisenhower Matrix is a time management tool that helps prioritize tasks based on their urgency and

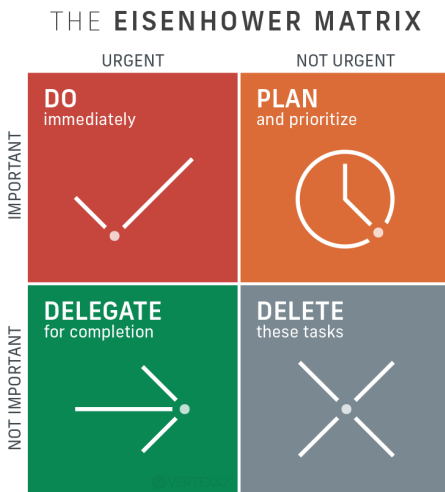


Photo credit: Vertex 42

Prioritizing

importance by placing them into one of four quadrants:

Quadrant I: Urgent and Important

Tasks: Immediate deadlines, and problems that need immediate attention. (i.e. studying for an exam happening tomorrow or resolving a major issue in a group project)

Action: These tasks should be addressed as soon as possible.

Quadrant II: Not Urgent but Important

Tasks: Long-term goals, personal development, planning, and activities that contribute to significant achievements. (i.e. working on a term paper with a distant deadline or

Prioritizing

attending office hours to discuss course material)

Action: Schedule time to work on these tasks regularly.

Quadrant III: Urgent but Not Important

Tasks: Distractions or interruptions that require immediate attention but don't contribute to long-term goals. (i.e. answering non-critical emails or attending meetings/events that don't align with your goals)

Action: Delegate these tasks if possible or handle them quickly.

Quadrant IV: Not Urgent and Not Important

Tasks: Activities that are neither urgent nor important, often serving as distractions. (i.e. excessive social media browsing or consuming media that don't contribute to personal or academic goals)

Action: Minimize or eliminate these tasks.

Notes

Time-Management

Organization Tools

Visual aids like calendars, planners, whiteboards, and to-do lists can be incredibly helpful (put them in a prominent place where you will see them regularly). Use color coding, stickers, or other **visual markers** to label files and track deadlines and progress.

Digital tools (i.e. Google Cal) with reminders and alarms can also be beneficial.

Be aware of **due dates**: highlight them on your syllabi, list them on a document, and/or add them to your physical and digital calendars, synch to your course calendar, and check the academic calendar.

Consistent routines can help you stay on track. Work to establish a daily or weekly schedule that includes dedicated times for studying, breaks, and fun.

Time-Management

Pomodoro Technique

This strategy involves working for 25 minutes and then take a 5-minute break.

You can set a timer on your phone, but if you are easily distracted when your phone is nearby, try using a physical timer.

Time Blocking

Try allocating specific blocks of time for different tasks. This can help you stay focused and manage your time more effectively.

Use time-blocking techniques in conjunction with the Eisenhower Matrix! For example, allocate specific blocks of time for tasks in Quadrant II to ensure you make steady progress on long-term goals/assignments (a final essay, for example).

Time-Management

Project Management

At the beginning of the semester, create a dedicated folder (digital or paper) for the assigned project. In your calendar mark dates to complete the following steps.

Discovery:

Identify your possible topic by halfway to the due date.

If you know what you definitely want to work on, write it down in your folder.

If you aren't sure what you'd like to do, while attending class and doing your readings and assignments, jot down topics you think you might be interested in pursuing in your folder.

Dedicate 10-15 minutes twice a week after class consider what you want to work on and write a few notes/ideas, you can cross out ones you don't want to pursue.

Time-Management

Brainstorming:

For each of the potential topics you've identified as a possible choice, keep a separate chart or list of information collected from class, your studies, and other experiences.

Your list can include ideas, references/sources, visual graphs and images; the important thing is just to jot down things that come to mind and that you come across that may be useful or interesting. Based on how much information you collect and how interesting it is to you, then choose the topic you wish to pursue.

Correspond with your instructor, in email or in person when you think you have chosen your topic or if you have multiple topics you are interested in pursuing and need help choosing. Not only can your instructor OK your project and assure you it meets the criteria for the assignment, but they can help you to narrow the project if it is too broad, and they may suggest resources or avenues for you to consult as you work on your project.

Time-Management

Divide Time, Collect Information

For the first half, research and collect information in preparation for your project. Add your notes, graphics, etc. to your folder now devoted to your chosen topic.

Once a week, review the materials you've collected—see if you can chunk the materials into categories or points that you want to address. This will help you organize later and allow you to identify tangential information you may want to discard.

Jot down insights you have about the materials and/or ideas you have about what you want to say—working toward your conclusion(s).

If you have begun to identify the order in which you plan to present the material, now begin to organize your materials. Number or mark the materials for easy reference as you build your project.

Time-Management

Prepare the Final Project

It's often not necessary to create your final project by working linearly from beginning to end (though if that works best for you, do what feels right for you).

Assign dedicated time during the last weeks to work solely on this project.

Using the materials you've collected, start by writing or designing around the points you feel most comfortable working on. This helps to avoid writer's block and anxiety about looming deadlines.

Jotting a few notes down about what you're thinking, even if you decide not to use them later can help you stay on track.

Remember, you can reorganize materials and sections. If you get stuck on one idea or concept for over 20 minutes move on to another and return later.

Time-Management

Proof and Review Your Project

The best way to proof your project is to finish a few days early. Put it away.

Return to review. Now you have fresh eyes and will be more likely to find remaining errors.

Reading text out loud, review it backward—start with the last sentence and review sentences in reverse order. This is a good way to identify mechanical and visual errors.

Note: Times for each step are just suggestions for maximizing success. Feel free to adjust to suit your needs!

Time-Management Checklist

- **Discovery:**
- **Brainstorming:**
- **Divide Time, Collect Info:**
- **Prepare Final Project:**
- **Proof and Review Your Project:**

(Add your dates above.)

Learning, Studying, & Retaining

Note-Taking

Handwrite notes if you can (studies show we remember information better when we handwrite it rather than type) and **color code them**.

Tip: Try using your favorite color for the most important information or for the topics/concepts you find the most challenging or boring. This helps draw your attention to these concepts when you review your notes and helps you remember information better!

If it helps, and is permitted, **record the lecture** so you can be present in class rather than scrambling to everything written down. Later, go back and take notes or make flashcards while you listen to the lecture. Having a recording of the lecture is useful if you find yourself zoning out in class.

Learning, Studying, & Retaining

Choosing Your Best Note-Taking Practice

- Do you remember things better when they are in paragraph form? Lists? Charts?
- Do you remember best with images?
- Are mnemonics or acronyms helpful?

Format your notes in whatever way works best for your brain. Consider your learning preferences: listing, mapping, boxing, and graphics.

Check out these note-taking techniques:

bit.ly/good-note-taking

Learning, Studying, & Retaining

Working with Study Buddies

Talk to people in the class who may be interested in meeting. If you are in a dorm check see if there are people taking sections of the same course you can collaborate with. Decide how and where you will meet, in-person or virtual. Schedule a time.

Choose a study location that will help you focus.

Create a plan during your first meeting:

- How long and how often will you meet?
- What would you like each person to bring in preparation? (Notes, questions, etc.)
- Set a goal for each session. These can be done for the semester or modified each time you meet.

Learning, Studying, & Retaining

Plan breaks to stay on task but allow for some time just to hang out, especially if you are meeting for a longer period of time.

Consider having a “leader for each session” if you are meeting with a group to keep you on track. Consider rotating who leads if that works well for your group.

Explain concepts and how you solve questions to one another.

Tip! Teaching someone else is a great way to reinforce your own learning.

When in doubt, ask for help. Prepare questions with your study buddies to ask in class or during office hours. Check out tutoring options.

Self-Advocacy & Self-Care

Tips for Talking with Instructors

Faculty want to help you succeed. Make note of your instructor's office hours. Introducing yourself to your instructor can make it easier for you to speak to them later. Contact your instructor in the first few weeks of your class: in-class, after class, via email, or during office hours.

Here are some things you could discuss with your instructor:

- Your progress in class
- Questions or concerns about course content or assignments
- Assistance in managing larger projects — defining the timeline and tasks to achieve the final project
- Suggestions for resources for your research
- Share your common interests

Self-Advocacy & Self-Care

If you fall behind on assignments, reach out to your professor and discuss strategies for getting back and keeping on track. Your professor may also suggest resources of help to you.

Other campus contacts:

- ucdenver.edu/learning-resources-center
- ucdenver.edu/offices/disability-resources-and-services
- ucdenver.edu/counseling-center
- Department and college advisors

Self-Advocacy & Self-Care

The Right Environment

Find or create a dedicated study space that works for you!

- Minimize distractions—visual distractions like clutter, other students, auditory distractions like loud music or people talking.
- Optimize your environment as much as you can—good lighting, comfy seating, nice scents, etc. whatever works for you!
- Make sure you have eaten and keep hydrated.
- Make studying visual and fun! Download lecture slides and annotate them; create visual flashcards; color code.
- Make sure you have everything you need—your power cords, wifi access, text book, course materials, etc.

Self-Advocacy & Self-Care

Use a Rewards-Based System

Figure out what gives you a boost of dopamine!

- A snack
- A fun drink
- A music or dance break
- Completing a different task
- A short walk outside
- A snuggle break with a furry (or other) friend
- Or treat yourself to something of your choice! It doesn't have to be something big. Little rewards matter!

Reward yourself after you accomplish a specific task, a set number of Pomodoro work sessions, etc.

Self-Advocacy & Self-Care

Feeling Anxious or Panicky?

Try the 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique to help you:

- Five things you can see: Describe five objects in your current surroundings.
- Four things you can touch: Describe four things that you can reach out and touch.
- Three things you can hear: Describe three distinct sounds you hear nearby.
- Two things you can smell: Describe two things you can smell or two of your favorite scents.
- One thing you can taste: Describe your favorite food or drink.

Self-Advocacy & Self-Care

Seek Inspiration

Explore videos, podcasts, etc. about the topic you are studying to get excited about it!

Are You a Rebel?

If you tend to dislike routines or rebel against too much structure in your life, be sure to build in enough flexibility that there is room for spontaneity each day.

Further Recommended Resources on EF

- **Goblin:** bit.ly/ToolsForGoblins

This website offers a collection of small, simple, single-task tools, mostly designed to help neurodivergent people with tasks they find overwhelming or difficult.

- **Branching Minds: The Executive Function Toolkit:**
<https://bit.ly/mindbranch>

The Executive Function Toolkit from Branching Minds offers resources to help educators and students in developing essential executive functioning skills.

- bit.ly/You_go

Ultimate Guide on Executive Functioning for College Students.

CU Denver's Accessibility Operations Team
Phillippe Ernewein — Denver Academy
CU Denver Faculty Assembly Disability
Committee.

Please see our site: bit.ly/FADisComm

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