

Turn Procrastination Into Insights

5 tips to make the most of your procrastination

By Anette Prehn, social scientist, author and framestormer



Counterproductive, needless, and delaying!

That is what procrastination is all about according to the psychologists. By definition, procrastination means to put off important, high-priority tasks and instead do things that are less relevant.

A 1992 study showed that 52% of students considered themselves having a moderate to high need for help concerning procrastination. 80–95% of them engaged in procrastination – and 3 out of 4 considered themselves “procrastinators”. Take that!

This article will reveal why our perception of procrastination is essentially flawed. Procrastination becomes a “problem” when we think we can command the brain to do this or that at a time that suits our predefined schedule – and when we think that great results and progress necessarily occur when we are glued to our office chairs in front of our computers. But this is not brain logic! The brain simply doesn’t work like that.

My claim is that the common perception of procrastination actually *hinders* the sprouting of insights – because it drains our working memory and brain capacity and leads our attention astray.

These 5 tips will show you how you can turn procrastination into insights – and thus make it a friend you treasure rather than an enemy you fight.

Sarah is a manager who also happens to be writing her MBA thesis these days. She complained to me that she was indeed a “procrastinator”, because every time she would have a day at home to study and work on her thesis, she would be tempted to do the washing or go and smoke a cigarette.

“So what do you say to yourself when doing that washing or smoking that cigarette?” I asked her.

“I blame myself. I criticise myself. I say things like ‘Why are you doing this all the time? You procrastinate again! You are so lazy... you won’t ever get anywhere with this!’”

Here are the 5 brain-based tips that completely changed Sarah’s approach to procrastination:

1. Bin the word “procrastination” altogether

Most of what we experience in the world is down to the mental categories we have constructed over time. We don’t let much else in. Our sensory experiences are massively filtered. Looking at our visual input only, we go from 10 billion bits per second to 100 in a split second. From the time a visual input hits the retina at the back of the eye until it is consciously perceived by us, it has been massively pruned. From 10 billion to 100!

This is good because it prevents us from getting mad. But it is tricky too because we think we see “reality as it is” whereas really we see mere reflections of whichever categories we happen to hold to be true.

Procrastination doesn’t exist in my life. Of course I know the word. Of course I know people who say the word – and claim they do it. And I am quite sure that if you saw a film of my life today it would indeed contain what others may call “procrastination” too. But I don’t let the word colour my life – because I know how easily it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

The people who believe they procrastinate tune their brains to look for examples of this. Seek and ye shall find! What you pay attention to is what will grow stronger. If they then also take it to the identity level: “*I am* a procrastinator” you can be sure that they spend a lot of time looking for evidence to prove their belief and mental category right. This is how human beings function.



Step 1 to turning procrastination into insights is to bin the word altogether. A slight challenge here is that the brain actually has a hard time “getting” our *away-from* intentions (“stop this!”, “don’t do that!” or “bin the word!”). Instead it needs a *towards* intention: a redefinition of the activities you used to call procrastination. At this initial point, however, it is sufficient to be aware of this – and you may well find that this article inspires your redefinition.

2. Fire your inner judge

Sarah was in the habit of the Blame Game like so many others. Her inner judge took control



whenever she did something that was not strictly related to working on the computer and her thesis. How did she spend her mental resources in those situations? She turned her brain into an opponent by basically filling up her precious working memory with internal, negative dialogue and stereotypical self-judgements.

Your working memory retains information and performs mental operations involving long-term memory. You need it to process new information, analyse, be creative, and solve problems. It is in other words, crucial for your productivity and results. But it also has a seriously limited capacity – and it can easily be overloaded.

Sarah could not make the most of the “procrastinating” situations because her inner judge kept her mental resources fully occupied. It was like a mental vampire, sucking her energy.

Step 2 is to fire your inner judge. Again, as this is an away-from intention, we need to consider what we do/think instead to keep its judgements at a distance. A powerful method is to put yourself in a more observational and curious mode: noticing, mindfully without judging, and being open to new learning. This way you free mental power and can apply it constructively.

3. Pave the way for insights

You have two systems in the brain:

- The slow system which is analytical, verbal, conscious, controlled, and works sequentially. This brain system has a limited capacity only.
- The fast system is intuitive, visual, non-conscious, automatic, and holistic. This brain system has a huge capacity.

Most people assume – by mere cultural default – that writing a thesis is a matter of concentrating constantly and using the slow system non-stop.

But this is not brain logic!

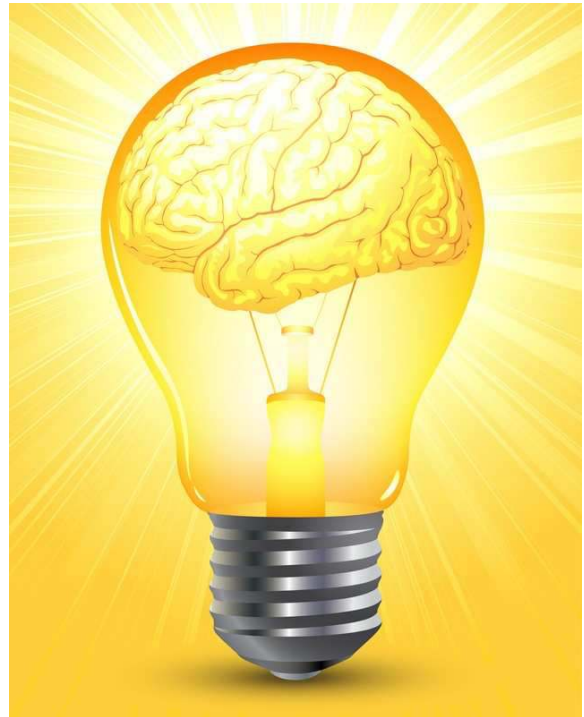
The art rather lies in oscillating between the two brain systems – making the most of them. The slow system helps you chop up the information you gather, analyse it and put it into words. The fast system gives you new insights, visions, ways of understanding the world, great ideas, and syntheses.

If you are overly concentrated — and in too much of a “problem-solving mode” — you will not reach an insight. You will be stuck in a mental impasse instead. Researchers know that insights are preceded by a period of reflection – NOT a period of problem solving concentration.

So the way to an insight is not the deep furrows on your forehead when you are trying to solve a problem. Rather it is to “space out” a little! Look at things as if you were daydreaming. Deliberately defocus your eyes as you do when you try to make one of those 3-D “Magic Eye” pictures come alive. This can easily be done when you “procrastinate”: Relax your eyes and brain and trust that the insights will come. They will!

Research shows that daydreaming like that actually improves your memory and that about 25% of creative people’s great ideas simply come when they daydream.

Research also shows that before you start working on a task, you should actually assess if it is a simple or a complex one. If the task is simple, go on and use the slow system (!) by working



analytically. That will give you the best results. But if a task is complex (like writing a thesis or like most of decision-making processes), you should indeed invite the fast system to play its role in order to get you the best results. It may seem surprising, and we often do the exact opposite, because we don't know the rules of the brain.

What some people consider "procrastination" is an opportunity for your brain to do you a major favour. You can turn your brain into an "insight machine" that gives you marvellous breakthroughs (when you "procrastinate"). When you start playing by its rules it will help you integrating the stuff you have concentrated on in new and innovative ways.

Thus Step 3 is to trust that the fast system of your brain can and will help you – also when you are in the middle of sorting out the washing, smoking a cigarette, taking a walk, going for a run, spacing out etc.!

When Sarah learnt this, she became way more effective – turning the relevant brain systems on or off, according to the situations. Whenever she felt "stuck" sitting in front of her computer, she would then deliberately "procrastinate", i.e. get up, do something else, relax her brain, and wait for new insights and inspiration to arrive.

4. Detect insights in its early stages

The fourth step is to become familiarised with what it feels like to be on your way to an insight. If you don't know this, you may mistake the sensations for something else and not act relevantly on them – thereby losing out on some major breakthroughs.

The best parallel I can give relates to female orgasms (sorry guys!). An orgasm expert once explained that actually, the stages leading up to an orgasm contains parts that may not be *that* pleasurable after all. If you don't know what is coming, you may well think that you are off-track and stop the activity, cheating yourself for a wonderful experience. Becoming familiar with the sensations leading up to an orgasm is thus a key to getting (more of) them.

It is likewise with insights. The more you start paying attention to the sensations related to insights on their way – the more you can seize the moment and make the most of them. If you

don't recognise the sensations and their potential, you may completely miss that the fast system of your brain is trying to tell you something.

Knowing yourself and distinguishing different sensations is thus an important skill to grow. I can wake up in the middle of the night with an idea, or with too many thoughts rambling in my working memory. I then use my self-knowledge and experience to decide which of these strategies to apply:

- *Strategy 1:* Emptying out my working memory, using an external memory – typically jotting down things on a piece of paper (this can be done without turning on the lights).
- *Strategy 2:* Getting up and starting to work. During intense periods in my work life it happens approximately once per week that I wake up at say 2 am and work for 2-3 highly productive hours before going to bed again. The next day I may be more tired, but typically also very fulfilled because I have reached important breakthroughs during the night.



So also here the art lies in turning a currently perceived enemy into something closer to a friend. Instead of fighting the fact that you wake up at night (which many people do), become familiarised with what may be on its way instead.

Some of the activities, I do that induce insights are:

- swimming with “an empty head” (i.e. not counting the number of lanes or worrying about my speed – that will never lead to insights)
- running or walking
- taking a shower
- spacing out, for instance by looking out of the window, far away (flights are great for this)
- breastfeeding
- putting my children to bed, lying next to them in the twilight.



Then all of a sudden: BANG!! An insight has arrived and I move straight into action mode! What happens in these situations is that alpha and theta waves are generated in the brain. I am relaxed and just on the edge of a more sleepy state. This paves the way for the gamma brain-wave rush that comes with an insight.

Your list of activities feeding insights may look very different from mine, and that is fine. The important thing here is to start noticing what works well for you and to act on it.

When you “procrastinate” it is easy to blame or criticise yourself like Sarah did. But this will leave no room for the insight to develop. And like with the female orgasm, you could mistake waking up at night with vibrant ideas/thoughts for a “sleep disorder”, completely missing the great stuff that can be yours to harvest. Step 4 is about growing your bodily awareness, and differentiating your different urges to “procrastinate”. A lot of them may simply be down to the fast system of your brain trying to get through to you. What a waste to ignore its voice!

5. Jot down your insights asap!

Step 5 is to jot down the insights you get as soon as possible. Don't try to store them in your brain/working memory. It takes up space that cannot be used for more problem solving, analysis, creativity or information processing. Your attempts to capture and remember your insight(s) simply drains your brain capacity. Get it out there instead, via an external memory: A notepad, your mobile phone notes or an audio recorder.

When I go swimming, I get at least 3-4 insights. Typically, I get these while I swim (unless the pool is really busy and I have to spend all my mental energy avoiding crashes) – otherwise after I get up from the pool (in the shower or on the way home). I can hold these 3-4 insights in my working memory until I have finished swimming. I then immediately turn on my Iphone and jot them down. Because I have become so familiarised with what it feels like when an insight is on its way, I



sometimes sense that there are more on their way. Then I get up from the pool in the middle of my swim, jot the insights down (which empties my working memory allowing for more insights to come) before I continue swimming.

If you don't empty your working memory on a frequent basis, it will go into meltdown and prevent you from getting more insights. Generally speaking, if your working memory is overloaded, you feel stressed, overwhelmed and finding it difficult to prioritise. Also – when going to bed – you find that you are tossing and turning and feeling like a frying chicken.

Sarah learnt to relieve the pressure on her working memory by using an external memory, her phone. She noticed that she became immediately happier and all of a sudden felt that she had “the big overview”.

You can completely transform your way of approaching tasks this way. My guess is that 80 percent of our “problems” with “procrastination” do not have to do with the *act* of procrastination itself but with our *thinking* about it.



Now, because procrastination is not a part my life, as I said, I do not “procrastinate”. I instead “set things to rise”. This is my towards formulation. As if I was kneading dough and setting it to rise, I do similar things with my mental processes. It is again a matter of trust. Trusting that ‘It will come!’ – knowing that a seed sown in the morning does not necessarily sprout the same day.

If you think work is only of the concentrated kind, you may feel challenged by this at first. But you may also feel relieved. The fast system is of a subconscious nature and you store a lot of information, understanding, wisdom, clues and solutions there.

In the world of psychology, incubation means to process something subconsciously, while doing other things. In the world of medicine, an incubation period means the time between being exposed to an infection and showing the first symptoms.

Incubation is an important concept because it tells us that things do take time. As with an infection, you may already have an insight working inside of you, taking form, developing right now – it just hasn't shown yet. The difference being that the infection will typically surface no matter what you do, whereas the insight will only surface if you allow it some space and trust that it will come.

You can experiment with “setting things to rise” just as if you were baking bread. Set the intention and wait for the fast system to start processing great ideas. So coming back to where we started: “setting things to rise”, “spacing out”, “waiting for an insight”, “rebooting”, “integrating” or “processing” are some of the words I use for the activities others call “procrastination”.

In my job, coaching and training leaders I so often see this “reframing” – i.e. change of interpretation – working powerfully.

There is a huge big unconscious, visual, intuitive brain capacity... just waiting for you to start trusting it!

To sum up: The 5 steps to make the most of your procrastination are:

1. Bin the word “procrastination” (call the activities something that boosts your resourcefulness)
2. Fire your inner judge (allowing free space in your working memory to observe and learn)
3. Pave the way for insights (by inviting the fast system to play along and initiating situations that further insights)
4. Detect insights in its early stages (become familiarised with the sensations leading to an insight – and act on them, when they are there)
5. Jot down your insights asap! (using an external memory so that you make room for more insights to come)

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