

How to create and achieve goals in University

It's hard to get anywhere in academics without an understanding of what you hope to achieve. Learn some unique goal-setting tips to help you improve how you create and achieve goals, both on a shortterm and long-term basis!

Looking inwards

The first step to creating and achieving goals is to first understand what you desire. This is necessary because it helps you establish your baseline – you can't monitor how well you're achieving goals if you can't recall where you began.

First, select what academic area you'd like to set your goals for. This could be for study skills traits you need improvement in (ex. Fixing study strategies, time management, organization), or a specific period of time you'd like to reflect on (ex. Previous semesters or full academic years).

Next, assess your strengths and weaknesses in that specific area to gain an understanding of where you're at. Be sure to be as thorough and detailed as possible – you're not doing yourself any favors through pretending to be good at something you're not!

From your weaknesses, select a couple to gain a realistic perception of the current state. Brainstorm these strengths and weaknesses with a set objective in mind (ex. Creating and setting goals pertaining to a singular semester, an entire academic year, related to time management and organization skills). The topic of focus doesn't matter so much -- just make sure it's concise enough for you to set detailed and direct goals.

Once you've got an idea of what your main objectives are, try out some methods for goal setting to map out how you plan to both create and achieve your goals.

Methods for goal setting

1. SMART Goals

SMART goals are a great way to narrow down what you'd like to accomplish, all through different time frames (Weekly, monthly, semesterly). In order to achieve goals, you must be as clear as possible with yourself with what you'd like to accomplish.

Paraphrased from Myron H. Dembo's Motivation and Learning Strategies for College Success: A Self-management Approach, pp. 101 – 102.

- **Specific:**

This is what allows you to specify exactly what your goal is in as much detail as possible. If your goals are vague, you lack the direction necessary to understand what you hope to achieve. Describe the context (ex. Class, semester, character change), as well as the specific outcome you hope to attain. Do not use general terms like "good," "well," "happy," "understand," and "know."

- Poor: "I want to do well in English."
- Better: "I want an A on my next essay in English."

- **Measurable:**
Ensure that your goal is something that can be measured -- not necessarily quantitative (ex. I hope to have an 85% average this semester) but anything more tangible than “I hope to get good marks this semester”. If you don't determine how a goal is measured, you will never know if you attained it. Include the minimum performance that will be accepted as evidence that you have achieved the goal.
 - Poor: “I want to study my biology textbook.”
 - Better: “I want to read chapter 7 in my biology textbook and answer all the discussion questions.”
- **Action-Oriented:**
A goal that focuses on actions rather than personal qualities. Identify your goal so it includes an action to be completed.
 - Poor: “I want to develop a better attitude about studying.”
 - Better: “I want to complete all my assignments before class and answer questions.”
- **Realistic:**
Finds a goal you know you can attain. Goals can be challenging but unrealistic. Analyze your goals to determine that you can expect to reach them.
 - Poor: “I want to read five chapters in my history textbook this evening and answer all the discussion questions.”
 - Better: “I want to read two chapters in my history textbook this evening and answer all the discussion questions.”
- **Timely:**
Finds a goal that breaks a longer-term goal into a shorter-term goal(s) and clearly specifies a completion date.
 - Poor: “I want to graduate at the head of my class.”
 - Better: “I want to make the honor roll this semester.”

The Five Principles of Successful Goal-Setting

Adapted from Locke & Latham, 1990

1. Commitment

This refers to your attachment to your goal and the determination you have in reaching it. Your ability to succeed in executing a goal depends on how committed you are to completing it. You are less inclined to completing a goal – particularly if it's more challenging – if you don't have a strong commitment.

What affects how committed you are to a task? First is how desirable you perceive it to be – if it's a tiring or unappealing task, you're less likely to want to complete it. You can increase a task's desirability by increasing the intrinsic motivation you have to complete it.

Second is how likely you believe you'll achieve this task. In order to truly believe you'll finish a task, use task organization techniques such as the Ivy Lee Method and Eisenhower Box (description below).

2. Clarity

Clearly define your goal to understand what you hope to accomplish. This can be done through brainstorming and organizational techniques like SMART goals.

3. Challenge

Ensure the goal is challenging to the point that it's interesting, but not enough to kill your determination or belief in your ability to complete the task. The goal of learning is to continually improve – tasks become meaningless if they do not push the limits in some way. The task must also be challenging enough to make the achievement worthwhile and satisfying.

4. Complexity

Ensure the task is broken down to its bare steps – complexity increases ambiguity, decreasing motivation and thus your chances of goal completion.

5. Feedback

Continually assess your progress and give yourself appropriate checkpoints. This can be done through tools like the UTSC Academic Advising & Career Centre's Assignment Calculator, linked below. <https://q.utoronto.ca/courses/242838/pages/writing-support-assignment-calculator>

Prioritizing

Of course, the previous methods are best suited for long-term goal-setting, such as on a monthly or semesterly basis. If your focus on goal-setting is smaller, such as weekly or daily, start off by free-writing all the tasks you need to complete within your time period. After you've got your list, begin prioritizing tasks.

Ivy Lee Method

At the end of the day, write the 6 most important tasks you need to do for the next day, prioritize them in order of importance. On the day of, focus solely on one task at a time. This allows you to understand solely what's necessary to write down, allows you to decide what you need to do before so you can have an easier time starting the next day, and focuses all your energy on a singular task.

Eisenhower Box

Create a four-quadrant chart separated based on your urgent and important (immediate tasks), important but not urgent (scheduled tasks for later), urgent but not important (tasks you can schedule much further into the future); and tasks that are neither urgent nor important (can be eliminated).

References

- Dembo, Myron H. (2000). Motivation and Learning Strategies for College Success: A Self-management Approach, pp. 101 – 102.
- <https://positivepsychology.com/goal-setting>
- <https://jamesclear.com/ivy-lee>
- <https://jamesclear.com/eisenhower-box>