

A woman with dark curly hair and glasses, wearing a black and white striped long-sleeved shirt, is smiling while working on a laptop. She is sitting at a dark desk in a bright office with large windows in the background. The scene is partially overlaid by a large blue abstract shape on the left side of the image.

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION

Prioritization

Prioritization



Strategies to share with students

Suggested ideas and practices educators can share with students to support awareness of the topic and development of the skill. Strategies can be adopted/adapted as needed.

- To-do lists.** If you do not currently use a planner to organize your life, begin focusing on prioritization by making simple to-do lists of tasks you must complete. You can write daily lists and then begin building larger lists for weeks, months, terms etc. Gradually add time frames for the different tasks and prioritize these based on the deadlines.
- Time tracking.** Pick a day or week in which you will track everything you do in a day and how long it takes to do everything. People often underestimate how long it takes to complete different tasks. Consider where your time goes and how this information can inform how you prioritize.
- Eisenhower box.** Use this tool to think about your tasks and what will make you most productive. In this framework, there are four possibilities: urgent and important (tasks you will do immediately); important but not urgent (tasks you will schedule to do later); urgent but not important (tasks you will delegate to someone else); neither urgent nor important (tasks you will eliminate). Combine this strategy with time-tracking. When you have some data from time-tracking, organize all the tasks into the Eisenhower Box matrix by considering whether the tasks were urgent or important. Examine how your time is being spent in each part of the matrix and then reflect on how you can improve.



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- Consider your needs and wants.** In addition to prioritizing assignments, you can prioritize other aspects of your life. Reflect on how you are spending your time and when you make a decision, consider whether the task involves a need or a want. This reflection can have a range of implications. You may be sacrificing some of your needs like food and sleep for other needs like exercise. Additionally, you may prioritize different courses based on needs and wants. You want to focus on an optional course because you enjoy the topic, but you need to take a required course that you are less interested in. This want-need relationship may then affect how you prioritize the courses and the completion of tasks related to them.
- Categorize your to-do lists into 'must-do', 'should-do', 'nice-to-do'.** This is another strategy for prioritizing that can be done on a daily, weekly, monthly or semesterly basis. Reflect on how things are categorized: always categorizing everything into 'must-do' may contribute to you feeling overwhelmed to meet deadlines. Conversely, if everything is categorized as 'nice-to-do', you may not have sufficient motivation or incentive to move forward with completing the task.



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- Energy tracking.** Use knowledge about your body and energy levels to determine when you should work on priority tasks. For one week, set an alarm or reminder for every hour of your day. When you receive the alert, rate your energy level from 1 to 10 on a spreadsheet. At the end of the week, calculate the average energy level for every hour of the day. Consider when you are most and least productive. If you have the most cognitive energy when you first wake up, consider prioritizing the hardest activities in that time. When you are more fatigued, you can complete the easier tasks.
- Eat the 'Frog'.** The frog is something on your to-do list that you do not want to complete. You have limited motivation to tackle it and you will likely procrastinate to complete it. If you use the 'eat the frog' strategy, you will prioritize completing that difficult or frustrating task first and simply get it done. You might tackle it on a Monday at the time of day you have identified as your most productive. This commitment can build a sense of accomplishment because you completed your most difficult task first. Once it is out of the way, you can reward yourself with more pleasant tasks, and the rest of the day or week may feel easier.



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Apply prioritization strategies to assignments and tests:

- When looking at the assignments for a course, consider what percentage of your grade each is worth to determine how long you will spend on certain tasks. For example, if you have a presentation worth 10% in the same week as a paper that is worth 45%, you want to consider the amount of time you will spend on each of those so that you are prioritizing and working efficiently.
- When you are working on one assignment, review all components of the requirements and break down the assignment into separate tasks. Think about how you will allocate time to sections of the assignment. For example, writing a section about academic literature may take more time to complete because of the additional research required.
- For test taking, review the entire test when you begin. How are the points allocated? Consider how you can use this information to prioritize different aspects of the test. This type of reflection at the beginning of the test can help you avoid running out of time and direct you to prioritize high-value questions.



Prioritization



Tips for course design and delivery

Ways educators can bring awareness of the topic and incorporate development of the skill into post-secondary course design and delivery.

- ✓ **Discuss your approach to lecturing and designing exams** at the beginning of the course. Help students understand how they can evaluate all the information in a lecture or course and make effective decisions about what information to prioritize when they are completing assignments or studying.
- ✓ **Design activities throughout the course** that allow students to practice prioritization skills. For example, early in the course you might have an activity about how to prioritize reading certain parts of a journal article or chapter or prioritizing certain information in the week's content.
- ✓ **Give students time in class to plan their semester**, then discuss the reasoning behind their plan and highlight important aspects of course content.
- ✓ **Describe how you have applied prioritization strategies in the course.** For example, instructors curate content. Share your decision-making process.
- ✓ **Talk about prioritizing academics and other areas of life at different times.** Setting an assignment deadline on a holiday may send a message to students that academic tasks should take precedence over spending time with family or focusing on wellness.
- ✓ **Implement timed activities throughout the course.** Give students a specific amount of time to read a journal article. You may wish to use the Pomodoro method for this. After 25 minutes, lead a discussion about whether the task was achievable in 25 minutes and how students might prioritize certain information-rich sections of journal articles in the future.



Prioritization



Activities to do with students

Downloadable activities with suggested guidelines that educators can do with students. Activities can be adopted/adapted as needed.

Activity: Course Outline Prioritization

Overview

During the first class and/or ahead of important work, engage students in a discussion on how to strategically approach the course outline. Provide information not typically included, like when students should begin working on assignments. End dates are typically listed but students would also benefit from (unofficial) start dates to help them organize their efforts.

Review the [Educator Activity Guide](#) before getting started with this activity.

Time

- Under 20 minutes
- 20 minutes to 1 hour
- More than 1 hour
- Over several classes

Format

- Individual
- In pairs
- Small groups
- Large groups
- Whole class

Modality

- In person
- Online synchronous
- Online asynchronous

Resources

- Module notes
- Paper
- Pen/pencil
- Laptop/tablet
- Course outline



Prioritization

Instructions

1. Introduce this activity by discussing planning as an essential step in prioritizing. Knowing what is required of us allows us to complete tasks in a productive and efficient order.
2. During the first class, engage students in a discussion on how to strategically approach the course outline. This strategic approach involves providing information that is not typically included, like when students should begin working on assignments. End dates are typically listed but students would also benefit from (unofficial) *start dates*.
3. Further, advise students to regard values (e.g., 30% vs. 60%), resources required (e.g., appointment with library), and complexity (e.g., number of steps/revisions required) as indicators of time to dedicate towards the course's components. The higher the value and the more detailed the steps, the more time they should be spending. Students can also consider lengths of assigned readings.
4. Engage students in a conversation where they reflect on how other skills can help them to prioritize and organize their workload (e.g., time management, reading comprehension, synthesizing and summarizing etc.).

Variation(s)

- Ask students to think of prioritization tips to embed into a course outline. They can use the ideas shared in this activity or refer to the strategies in the module notes.



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Activity: Ready, Set, Teach

Overview

Students develop a presentation collaboratively within a class by using prioritization techniques. Present students with a course-related topic or question and tell them they have a set time to prepare an engaging and interactive presentation for the class. Inform students that this is a prioritization activity and that their 'success' will be defined largely by how they prioritize.

Review the [Educator Activity Guide](#) before getting started with this activity.

Time

- Under 20 minutes
- 20 minutes to 1 hour
- More than 1 hour
- Over several classes

Modality

- In person
- Online synchronous
- Online asynchronous

Format

- Individual
- In pairs
- Small groups
- Large groups
- Whole class

Resources

- Module notes
- Paper
- Pen/pencil
- Laptop/tablet
- Groups may make use of other resources in their presentations



Prioritization

Instructions

1. Frame this activity by sharing with students that knowing what is *essential* and what is *helpful* for their tasks can impact prioritization. Deliberate practice in making this distinction can support students with their abilities to prioritize.
2. Without any notice, present students with a course-related topic or question and tell them they have 30 minutes to prepare a brief engaging and interactive presentation for the class. Inform students that this is a prioritization activity and that their 'success' will be defined largely by how they prioritize.
3. Assign students to small groups.
4. In these groups, tell students they will use the 30 minutes to complete the task from start to finish: think of an approach, develop ideas and resources, produce the presentation. At the end of the 30 minutes, students will give/send you a copy of their presentation.
5. During the same class or in the following class, invite students to share an outline of their presentation or present it to the class if time permits.
6. Encourage students in the audience to ask questions and offer their feedback on the presentation to provide an opportunity for the presenting team to elaborate on their experience with this activity. This reflection will make for a rich conversation about prioritization.
7. Follow up with a large class discussion. Some questions to share with the class:
 - *Which prioritization techniques did you use to sift through the work of this activity?*
 - *How did you arrive at these techniques?*
 - *How did you manage your time?*
 - *What would you change if you could do this activity again?*
 - *What would you do the same if you could do this activity again?*

Variation(s)

- Ask students to consider how they can apply the learning from this activity to their personal prioritization techniques.
- Have students prepare a recording of their presentation and invite peers to watch them and provide feedback.



Prioritization



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Activity: Priority List Reflection

Overview

Ask students to try to remember and list everything they did yesterday. Next, students should individually decide whether each of those tasks was low, medium, or high priority. Students reflect on their next steps as they relate to prioritization.

Review the [Educator Activity Guide](#) before getting started with this activity.

Time

- Under 20 minutes
- 20 minutes to 1 hour
- More than 1 hour
- Over several classes

Modality

- In person
- Online synchronous
- Online asynchronous

Format

- Individual
- In pairs
- Small groups
- Large groups
- Whole class

Resources

- Module notes
- Paper
- Pen/pencil
- Laptop/tablet



Prioritization

Instructions

5. Explain to students that prioritization usually refers to future actions and these are usually guided by the priority measures of *low*, *medium*, or *high*. Frame the activity by telling students that there is also much value in reflecting on our actions and considering whether they were low, medium, or high priority.
6. Ask students to try to remember and list everything they did yesterday; give them a few minutes to complete the task.
7. Have students individually reflect on and decide whether each of those tasks was *low*, *medium*, or *high* priority. Explaining these responses will help students to develop self-awareness.
8. Invite students to reflect on their next steps as they relate to prioritization. (e.g., set amounts of time to devote to an action based on priority, share prioritization goals with a friend or family member and ask them to comment when they see them wavering).

Variation(s)

- Ask students to develop symbols or indicators of priority and to use these in their calendars, planners, notes etc.
- Encourage students to setup a digital or physical board where they can visually represent their daily/weekly tasks and prioritize them

