



# FROM DEADLINES TO TIMELINES: THE MEANINGFUL TRANSITION ON THE ACADEMIC LANDSCAPE

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## ABSTRACT

*Teachers the world over are constantly faced with the challenge of late submissions when it comes to students turning in their assignments. Analysis of the issue reveals that if the problem is traced to its grassroots, Academic Procrastination heads the list of causative factors. To surmount this hurdle, teachers have no viable option but to impose strict deadlines to ensure that students submit their course work without undue delay. The present study attempted to investigate and compare the popularity of 3 deadline schedules, namely Evenly Spaced Schedule, End Regimen and Self-imposed Schedule among Middle and High School students. The sample comprised of 373 students of a private aided English-medium State Board School in Mumbai. Results revealed that the vast majority of students in both school sections preferred the Self-imposed Schedule, followed by the End Regimen and the Evenly Spaced Schedule. An analysis of the possible bearing that the choice of deadline schedule could have on the quality of projects submitted by students, indicated that those opting for the Self-imposed and End Regimens produced work which was far more outstanding than those who opted for the Evenly Spaced Schedule. Results also implied that the Self-imposed regimen was most popular among students even when studied in relation to their level of procrastination. The study highlights the need for educators to help learners develop the skill of creating their own constructive timelines which would guide them to achieve academic targets in good time, instead of imposing deadlines which serve as a kill-joy and student stressor.*

**INDEX TERMS-** *Academic Procrastination, Deadline, Evenly Spaced Schedule, Self-Imposed Schedule, End Regimen, Middle School, High School*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a world where everything is just one click away humans have become more laid-back. The situation becomes more intense when it comes to the world of learners and their tryst with education. They seek one-stop solutions for the completion of school assignments and tasks.

Procrastination has been referred to as the psychopathology of everyday life (Silver and Sabini, 1981). Procrastination is defined as delaying performance and tasks until a person becomes stressed as a result of running out of time. Academic procrastination is described as a postponement in commencing or completing an activity, such as an academic assignment, that an individual plans to complete but does not find motivating (Sepehrian, 2012). Procrastination has been emphasized as a major obstruction to academic success in most research (Hen and Goroshit, 2012). Cao (2012) claims that procrastination and motivation are intimately linked as students who lack the motivation fail to focus on and complete their assignments on time. Motivation is a strong indicator of encouraging oneself to do something (Amirullah and Boediono, 2004). Aremu et al. (2011) proposes that low energy, low motivation, and lack of confidence are all strong pointers of why students procrastinate. A study by Handoko (2012) revealed that students with higher motivation have the capability to accomplish targets in the set time frame and hence desist from Academic Procrastination. Pychyl and Flett (2012), described procrastination as a failure

of self-control. Students grapple with self-regulation as it demands a thorough understanding of how to successfully manage and instruct oneself (Zimmerman, 2002). It has been proposed that procrastination like other harmful habits is also driven by a lack of self-regulation. It is interesting to note that many intelligent individuals who procrastinate become successful. To succeed in the learning process, students must understand how to put self-regulation into practice making it a habit. Cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral techniques are all included under the umbrella term of 'self-regulation'. Students who procrastinate usually perform poorly in any activity, as deferring activities pile up into loads of unfinished work and missed deadlines. This leads to a malicious cycle in which procrastinators receive lower grades than non-procrastinators. Nordby et al. (2017) assigned academic tasks to students and analysed the delays in their task submission. Results indicated that delays could be in the process of embarking on the activity, working at it, or even completing it. It is seen that academic procrastination could arise due to low motivation, lack of self-esteem, fear of failure, difficulty in understanding the topic, low energy levels, and poor organizational skills (Gunn, 2020). Shatz, 2018 opines that procrastination is also linked to psychological issues. Students may be discouraged by variables such as anxiety, fear of failure, and tiredness. When these psychological elements begin to overpower a student's self-control and motivation, they are unable to regulate their actions.



The concept of 'deadlines' evolved on the educational landscape in the hope that it would remedy 'academic procrastination', the most common syndrome affecting a vast majority of the student population. However, as the very word 'deadline' suggests, these cut-offs and target dates started to spell disaster for students, looming over them large and low like death sentences/penalties. Studies also indicate that people may procrastinate due to deadlines. Shorter time limits for completing a task are believed to lead to the production of more complicated goals, according to a study by Peters et al. (1984) based on Parkinson's Law, whereas longer time constraints are thought to contribute to the formation of easier tasks. Izmailov et al. (2016) recognized two possibilities of how Parkinson's Law could affect task completion. The first being, when people have extra time to do a task, they typically use it to "perfect" or "improve" other tasks, and as a result, the work starts to take up all available time. The second possibility is that people are discouraged from finishing work early, because doing so implies that the deadline was excessively long and that the job might have been completed much faster. Often, students lack the capacity to take the task seriously and fail to prioritize the hierarchy of which task should be done first. A study conducted at Stanford University indicated that the more time a student has to complete the task, the less the accomplishment (Pencavel, 2015). However, forcing oneself into adhering to strict deadlines is not the answer to this challenge, because it will result in other deviant behaviors. A review of earlier research thus indicates the need for educators to unearth an effective and flexible time management plan to help learners conquer the challenge of procrastination and identify a deadline schedule that works best in ensuring the completion of tasks by striking a healthy balance between punctuality and perfection.

The present study attempted to delve into students' preferences for different regimens of task completion in a bid to consider their views as important stakeholders in the process of education. The research endeavored to identify and compare the most popular deadline schedule among the student fraternity of Middle and High School. It also analyzed the choice of deadline in relation to the quality of work turned in by students and their level of procrastination. More importantly, the study proposed constructive remedial strategies that teachers can employ to help students evolve constructive and meaningful timelines to inculcate the healthy habit of resourceful time management, efficient multitasking and self-regulation.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives were as follows:

- ✓ To assess Middle/High school students' preferences for 3 selected Deadline Schedules.
- ✓ To identify the most popular of the 3 selected Deadline Schedules among Middle/High school students in the completion of school tasks and assignments.
- ✓ To compare the most popular of the 3 selected Deadline Schedules among Middle and High school students in the completion of school tasks and assignments.

- ✓ To assess the trend if any on comparing the Deadline Schedule opted for and the quality of tasks/assignments submitted by the Total number of Students.
- ✓ To assess the trend if any on comparing the Deadline Schedule opted for and the Level of Procrastination in the Total number of Students.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design employed was descriptive and included a survey. It sought to analyse the level of procrastination and preference for 3 selected Deadline Schedules in Middle and High School students. It tried to explore any emerging trends in the choice of Deadline Schedule and its probable effect on the quality of assignments turned in as well as the level of procrastination.

The Students' Procrastination Perception Scale used for the study was a 3 point Likert scale comprising of 30 items related to 3 categories of factors responsible for Academic Procrastination, namely, Personal Factors, Social Factors and Life Style Factors. Based on the total scores obtained on the scale, students were categorized into High procrastinators, Medium procrastinators, Low procrastinators and Non-procrastinators. They were then allocated a task by the teacher which comprised of three assignments carrying 5 marks each. They were allowed to choose ANY ONE of the following three deadline schedules in keeping with the final date for completion of all 3 assignments.

1. **Evenly spaced regimen:** The students had to submit one assignment each week on a fixed day of that week.
  2. **Self-imposed regimen:** The students had to choose their own schedule during the 3 weeks for submission of the 3 assignments, such that they submitted all assignments before/by the deadline date.
  3. **End regimen:** The students had to submit all three assignments at the end of the 3 weeks on a fixed date.
- In the last phase of the study, each assignment was assessed out of 5 marks and scored. The possible relationship between the type of deadline schedule chosen by students and the quality of assignments turned in by them was assessed. The assignments were graded as Outstanding, Very Good and Satisfactory and assigned scores of 3, 2 and 1 respectively. Those who did not turn in their assignments were given a score of zero.

## 4. SAMPLING DESIGN

The sample comprised of 373 students of the secondary section (standards V to IX) of a private -aided English-medium school in Mumbai, affiliated to the S.S.C Board of Education, selected by the convenience sampling technique.

## 5. STATISTICAL DESIGN

**Descriptive analysis** included the summary of the Percentage of Middle/High School students opting for the 3 different Deadline Schedules and the comparative summary of the Deadline Schedules opted for in relation to their Level of Procrastination and Quality of assignments turned in.



## 6. GEOGRAPHICAL AREA

The study was conducted in a Private-aided English Medium school (affiliated to the State Board of Education) situated in Bandra, one of the suburbs in North Mumbai.

## 7. RESULTS

Table 1 shows the percentage-wise comparative summary of student preferences for the 3 deadline schedules in Middle and High school students.

**TABLE 1**  
**Percentage-Wise Comparative Summary of Student Preferences for the 3 Deadline Schedules**

Deadline Schedule	No. of students		% of Students		Total Number of Students	Total Percentage of Students
	Middle School	High School	Middle School	High School		
Evenly-spaced Schedule	44	32	22.33	18.18	76	20.37
End Regimen	68	56	34.51	31.81	124	33.24
Self-imposed Schedule	85	88	43.14	50	173	46.38

From Table 1 it can be concluded that the percentage of students opting for the Self-imposed deadline schedule was the highest, followed by those preferring the End Regimen, with the lowest percentage favoring the Evenly-spaced schedule in both Middle School and High School sections. A closer look at the data further reveals that the Evenly-spaced schedule and the End-regimen were more popular among the Middle school students, while the Self-imposed schedule ranked higher among the High school section. This clearly indicates the possibility of High school students preferring to set and follow

their own time targets when it comes to submission of assignments. The Middle Schoolers being younger on the contrary, are more likely to accept and adhere to external deadlines set by teachers, be it in terms of submitting smaller portions of the main task at fixed intervals or by a given end date.

Table 2 shows a percentage-wise comparative summary of the choice of Deadline Schedule in relation to the Quality of Assignments in the Total Number of Students.

**TABLE 2**  
**Percentage-Wise Comparative Summary of the Choice of Deadline Schedule in Relation to the Quality of Assignments**

Quality of Assignment Deadline Schedule	Evenly-Spaced Schedule	Self-Imposed Schedule	End Regimen
Outstanding	7.23	13.13	5.36
Very Good	4.83	16.35	7.24
Satisfactory	2.68	4.02	4.29
Not Turned In	3.22	13.94	17.69

As revealed by the data in Table 2, the percentage of 'Very good' and 'Outstanding' assignments i.e. 16.35% and 13.13% respectively, in terms of work quality of students opting for the Self-imposed Deadline Schedule was distinctly higher as compared to the quality of work turned in by those going by the other 2 regimens. This could probably be attributed to the fact that students were more comfortable working at their own pace in keeping with their understanding and potential, hence leaving them less pressured. However, it is also important to take note of the fact that 13.94% of students choosing the Self-imposed schedule did not turn in their assignments indicating that there could turn out to be a lack of self-control in such a regimen. Another figure that deserves attention is 17.69% of students opting for the End

regimen did not turn in their assignments at all. This provides clear evidence that students in this category often get into the habit of putting things off for the last moment and finally cannot keep to deadlines at all, thus getting caught in the web of procrastination. The lowest percentage of assignments 'Not turned In' came from those opting for the Evenly-spaced Schedule, thereby asserting the role of this regimen in ensuring that students stay on track and turn in work regularly at set intervals, leaving them no option to pile up or alternatively not submit their assignments at the end.

Table 3 shows a percentage-wise comparative summary of the choice of Deadline Schedule in relation to the Level of



Procrastination in the Total Number of Students.

**TABLE 3=**  
**Percentage-Wise Comparative Summary of the Choice of Deadline Schedule**  
**in Relation to the Level of Procrastination**

Level of Procrastination / Deadline Schedule	Evenly-Spaced Schedule	Self-Imposed Schedule	End Regimen
High Procrastinators	0	0.53	0.53
Medium Procrastinators	6.70	18.77	10.46
Low Procrastinators	9.65	36.19	17.43
Non Procrastinators	0	0	0.27

The findings in Table 3 indicate that the Self-Imposed schedule was most popular among the Low followed by the Medium Procrastinators with 36.19% and 18.77% of students opting for it. This supports the fact that students with low procrastination tendencies would have better self-control and self-regulation in completing their school work. Similarly, it can also be observed from the table that students low on procrastination or with a medium level of procrastination i.e. 17.43% and 10.46% also opt for the End Regimen to some extent, again substantiating evidence that they do not lose focus of the task in question and do turn in their assignments by the final cut-off date. A very small or negligible fraction i.e. 9.65% of low procrastinators, 6.70% medium procrastinators and none of the high procrastinators opted for the Evenly-Spaced schedule, implying that students who procrastinate detest following external deadlines or periodic submissions imposed by external authorities such as teachers or significant others.

**Interpretation:** Thus, from Tables 1, 2 and 3 it can be concluded that the Self-Imposed Deadline Schedule was the most popular among Middle and High School students, followed by the End Regimen and lastly the Evenly-Spaced Schedule, thus indicating that the student fraternity of today is self-driven and sets work targets in keeping with their personal ability, capacity and potential, irrespective of restrictions prescribed by teachers. It was interesting to note that the Quality of Assignments too was highest in students opting for the Self-Imposed Schedule. Last but not the least, this schedule was the preferred option by both low and medium procrastinators.

Students opting for the Self-imposed schedule would probably have had a high self-control to stay focused on and committed to the completion and submission of the task in question. Previous studies too show that self-control and grit are two of the most important variables that explain success in different aspects of people's daily life (Duckworth and Gross, 2014). Self-control is known to encourage delayed gratification and directly influences thoughts, emotions and impulses. On the other hand, grit heightens the achievement of goals through perseverance. It thus follows that the development of a high level of regulation from a young age will produce a long-term effect, since it develops resistance to distracting desires and

instead diverts behavior towards the achievement of goals (Hofmann et al., 2012). The age group of the sample too could have influenced the choice of deadline schedule. Studies have shown that during adolescence, students develop the capacity of establishing plans or preparing events that are more distant in time, in contrast to children, whose capacity is more limited to close events (Barkley, 1997). Many studies also show that women have more grit than men and this could further substantiate why the Self-imposed Schedule was most popular and productive among the sample which comprised 373 female students from Middle and High School at the pre-adolescent / adolescent stage.

### 8. SUGGESTIONS

The following recommendations can be put forth based on the findings of the present study:

1. Healthy study habits must be developed in children at an early age by parents, teachers and care-givers.
2. Students must be trained in setting up their own study timetables according to their pace and potential to strike a balance between punctuality and perfection in turning in school work.
3. Tasks should be broken into smaller achievable portions to be submitted at comfortable intervals so as to create less stress and anxiety in students' minds.
4. Teachers must avoid giving very far-fetched submission dates, as it often results in students losing focus of the task in question encouraging them to procrastinate.
5. Submissions announced at too short a notice must be avoided as they impact work quality as well as mental health of students.
6. Regular monitoring and checks by teachers are needed once tasks have been assigned, to ensure that students have understood what it involves and are working at it consistently.
7. Providing initiatives, rewards and reinforcement for early/on-time task completion could serve as extrinsic motivation in the early years and contribute to developing punctuality in learners. Intrinsic motivation must be cultivated in later childhood so that students learn to be responsible for their own learning.
8. Teach children to stay focused on a task by training



them to plan their school work strategically, set self-imposed deadlines, set goals to complete tasks within specific focused boxes of time commonly referred to as timeboxing, resorting to the Pomodoro technique using focused work sessions with frequent short breaks and using task management tools such as managing priorities and tracking tasks from beginning to end.

9. Teachers must support students' study strategies when designing deadlines and avoid situations where multiple deadlines are clubbed together.
10. The existing hype of deadlines needs to be removed by replacing the term with 'timelines' in academic vocabulary, so as to eradicate the phobia and anxiety that accompanies assignment submission for students.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Over the years procrastination has evolved from a habit to a way of life among the student population. It not only affects their academic performance but also interferes with their mental health by contributing to their stress and anxiety through a piling up of tasks and assignments which they cannot complete successfully. The old adage 'Time and tide wait for no man' certainly holds true with respect to Procrastination. Punctuality and promptness are essential habits to be engrained in students' character by teaching them the art of time management. This would require that parents, teachers and care-givers help a child to cultivate healthy study habits from a young age. Once they develop a sense of responsibility and accountability in their own learning process, they would learn self-control and self-regulation, setting their own time targets for completion of tasks and assignments. There is a pressing need to do away with the term 'deadlines' which though intended to ensure students turning in their school work on time, have come to be analogous to 'death penalties' for them. It is time to replace the concept with the term 'timelines' which would motivate students and teach them the value of time and the art of time-management. The challenge of academic procrastination can be overcome if students found the task submission cut-off dates more realistic in keeping with their interest, pace and capacity. Students are the main stakeholders in the teaching-learning process and their learning preferences cannot go unnoticed. It is thus important for teachers to permit students to set their own targets for academic work completion, provided they adhere to the curriculum time frame and produce assignments that bear the mark of quality. It's time educators the world over shifted their gaze from 'Quantity' to 'Quality' on the educational landscape in terms of the work output of students. This transformation would only be possible if deadlines evolved into timelines giving education the much needed facelift for a paradigm shift in learning.

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